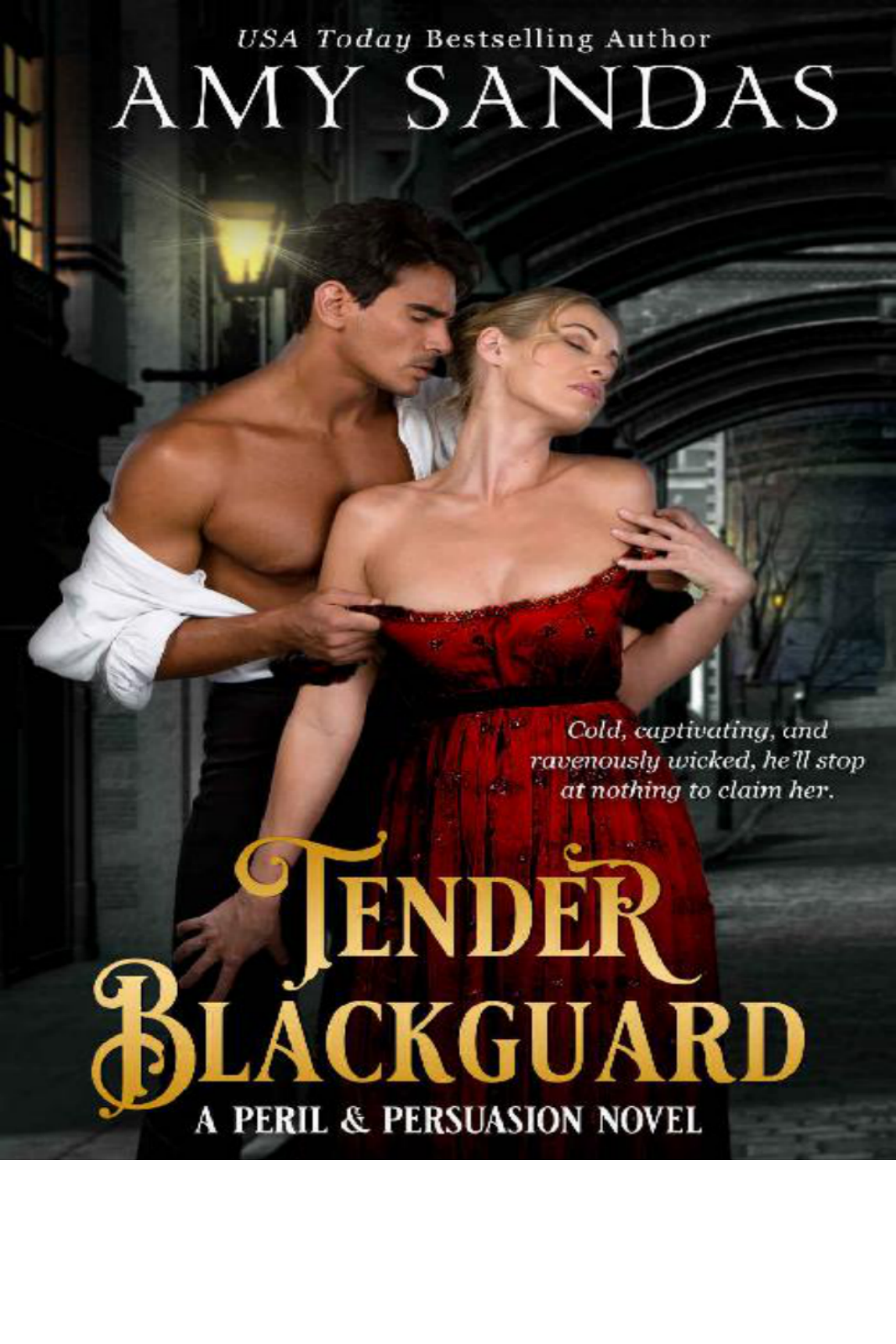


USA Today Bestselling Author

AMY SANDAS



*Cold, captivating, and
ravenously wicked, he'll stop
at nothing to claim her.*

TENDER BLACKGUARD

A PERIL & PERSUASION NOVEL

Tender Blackguard

Peril & Persuasion, Volume 2

Amy Sandas

Published by Amy Sandas, 2021.

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

TENDER BLACKGUARD

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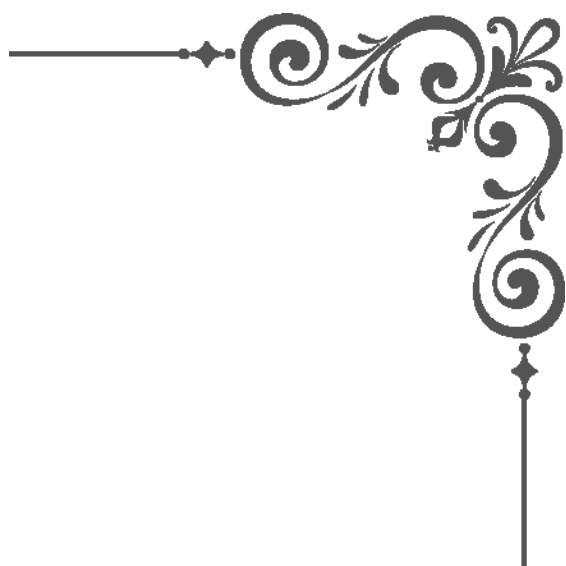
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To Auntie Dar with lots of love and gratitude, for being the woman you are and for always having the perfect blend of true heart and bold irreverence.



Chapter One

London, October 1817

My Dearest L,

Forgive me. You will likely not understand what I must do, but I pray you accept it. Do not try to find me. And please, on all you hold dear, stay far away from Curzon Street.

I'm so sorry. –H

Lark Evans read through the familiar words three more times before carefully folding and tucking the worn note back into her glove. The lines no longer made her tremble with loss, sadness, or confusion. After nearly a month, those emotions had firmly evolved into a low-burning focus that steadily fueled her purpose.

The hackney cab she'd hired to bring her to this ostentatious area of Mayfair drove off behind her. Though her boots already squished from the puddles on the sidewalk, the hems of her skirts were soaked and heavy, and water dripped steadily from the brim of her bonnet, she didn't yet move toward the door looming in front of her. Instead, she tipped her head back, allowing the drizzly rain to bathe her face as she assessed the elegant townhouse belonging to the Marquess of Warfield.

The aristocratic home had been constructed of red brick in four stories and was adorned with white trim, Palladian-style windows, and a grand arched doorway. It was an imposing structure, effectively denoting the extreme wealth and elite social position of its denizen.

Lark breathed deeply through her nose to steady her heart rate. Though her stomach churned with the importance of her task, her resolve did not waver. After a moment, she turned and made her way around the house to the servants' entrance. With a smart rap of her knuckles on the door, she straightened her spine and waited.

The door was opened a few short moments later by a middle-aged footman. His livery, trimmed in gold, was a blue so dark it was nearly black. His expression was suitably impassive.

Lark offered a brief and taciturn smile. "Hello. I am Mrs. Evans. I've an appointment to interview for the position of housekeeper."

The footman stepped aside with a short gesture for her to enter. "This way, please."

He led her down a dark and narrow hall that eventually emerged from behind an impressive mahogany staircase into what appeared to

be the house's main entry hall. The space was cavernous, with marble flooring, gleaming wood, and an excess of filigree. A quick flick of her gaze upward proved that the ceiling was painted to depict a summer sky and was framed by elaborate crown molding.

Without pausing, the footman continued across the marble floor to a heavy door tucked into the corner at the back of the hall.

Lark remained behind the male servant as he opened the door and announced in a flat tone, "Mrs. Evans has arrived, my lord."

The voice from within was heavy and dark. "Show her in."

A chill tickled the back of Lark's neck then slid down the hollow of her spine. Despite the weight of foreboding sinking into her bones, when the footman stepped aside, she strode confidently, purposefully forward into a gentleman's study.

Instinct born of a childhood lived in near-constant peril triggered a split-second assessment of her surroundings.

Straight ahead was a wide and gleaming desk set before a wall of windows—likely oversized casements—currently covered by drapes that blocked any bit of light that might have seeped in from the rainy day. The desk held an ink pot and a lamp which managed to illuminate the space just enough to show no one sat behind the imposing piece of furniture. On her left stood three large bookcases containing volumes which had gathered a shameful amount of dust. An elaborately carved marble fireplace took up most of the wall to her right and in front of it an arrangement of sofas and chairs designed in the Italian Baroque style. Aside from the door through which she'd entered, there was another door barely visible in the shadows between two of the bookcases.

The room's décor was very near to being garish. From what she'd seen in the entry hall, she'd guess the entire house was done in the overly ostentatious style.

Opulent. And joyless.

It took only a moment to determine the man who'd spoken was sitting in one of the tall wingback chairs turned toward the fire. The one with its back to the door so all she could see was a pair of black boots planted firmly on the floor. She'd assumed she'd be meeting with the house's steward for this interview, but the footman had addressed the man as *my lord*, which meant she was about to meet the master of the house instead.

After hearing the door close behind her, Lark felt a very brief flash of uncertainty, but she quickly squashed it. Even the smallest bit of doubt was pointless. She was here for a reason and that reason hadn't changed. Coming to a stop in the center of an expansive Persian rug, she did not turn toward the only other occupant in the room but remained facing the desk in front of her. As the marquess had not

risen to his feet at her entrance, she chose to keep her gaze steadily forward, her hands clasped lightly at her waist.

Enduring. Patient.

She'd been rigorously trained to be so. Or to *appear* so anyway. No one need know what her true nature was beneath the calm, steady surface of her demeanor. Least of all the potential employer sitting silently somewhere to her right.

"Have a seat, Mrs. Evans. You're soaking my carpet."

A strange chill swept over her skin at the hard tone of his voice, a sound not unlike raw steel. Turning dutifully, however, Lark approached the chair directly facing the one he occupied. She properly refrained from pointing out that soaking the silk-covered chair wouldn't be much better.

After lowering herself to the edge of her seat and propping her bag at her feet, she kept her expression neutral as she directed her focus to the man who would—*God willing*—become her new employer.

Darkness.

It was the only word that came to mind at her first sight of the marquess.

Though the flames in the nearby hearth were full and reaching, the man remained in deep shadow. So much so, it appeared deliberate. Dressed all in black but for a glowing white cravat, he sat straight in the chair. His booted feet were flat on the floor, and his gloveless hands rested on his thighs. Black hair was brushed back from a square forehead, and dark stubble shadowed his angular jaw. Thick, straight eyebrows at first obscured his lowered gaze as he took in the sight of her, much as she did him, though a great deal slower.

Starting at her sodden feet, he assessed her worn boots, her modest day dress of navy-blue wool, and the long pelisse she wore over it. His gaze paused at the mismatched buttons fastening her outer garment and the darker material at her shoulders where the rain had soaked down to her skin. His focus flickered briefly over her dark gray bonnet before settling finally on her face.

Ice.

His eyes. A blue so pale and clear they made her think of ice. And just as cold.

He was a predator. A hunter. Every survival instinct she'd honed over the years was suddenly on high alert. An acute tingle of awareness speared through her, awakening every nerve. She was not the type to indulge in fantastical imaginings, but something about this man made her feel as though she balanced on the knife-edge between fight and flight.

"Mrs. Evans." He spoke her name slowly then paused as though awaiting her confirmation.

She remained unmoving and silent. Everything inside her urged her to proceed cautiously. But caution was a luxury she didn't have.

There was a subtle bunch and release at the corners of his jaw, suggesting he'd clenched his teeth. "You're rather young to be a housekeeper." His tone was heavy with judgmental accusation.

"I'm older than I look, my lord." It was true. She was often believed to be a great deal younger than her twenty-eight years. Even so, he was not wrong. Not many maids managed to work up to the position of housekeeper at her age. She hoped he wouldn't press the issue, but she was prepared to provide proof of her qualifications should he require it.

Lark had gone to a great deal of trouble, reaching out to acquaintances from years past, calling in age-old favors, making promises she couldn't honestly be certain she'd be able to honor. It had taken weeks of unrelenting determination to gain this interview. She was not likely to get such a fortuitous opportunity again, and she couldn't allow it to slip away. There was no telling when she'd get another.

"You've reviewed my references?"

Another pause. "Diligently."

"Then you know I'm more than capable of managing a household of this size, my lord." She pressed her lips together to keep from saying more in her desperation to persuade him. Sometimes, the less one said, the more convincing they were. She did not want him to suspect how badly she wanted this position.

"You've held positions in a number of noble households, some of them for less than a year at a time." His focus remained fiercely direct.

"That is not so unusual," she calmly pointed out. "There can be a variety of reasons a household servant might seek occasional changes in employment."

"What were your reasons?" Unrelenting.

Lark evaded his question by stating firmly, "Every one of my prior employers provided positive reports of my time with them."

He stared at her with a cool, unwavering gaze. "Your most recent position was the only one noted to be in the role of housekeeper. A position you held for less than two months."

"I never claimed not to be new to the position, my lord, but I assure you I *am* qualified."

Angular features narrowed with irritation. "Why should I hire a young woman with such little experience to fill one of the most important roles in my household?"

His voice was impatient. Dismissive.

Panic flared. Lowering her chin, she met the man's chilled gaze. "Lord Warfield, as my references support, I've more than fifteen years

of experience serving a number of aristocratic families. I am quite capable of managing your household with proper efficiency.” She paused, bracing herself for the risk she was about to take. “Something of which I know you’re in rather desperate need. You see, I’ve been diligent, as well. You’re significantly understaffed when it comes to upstairs and downstairs maids and have been for all the months since you reopened this house. I also know that you’ve had precious few applicants for the empty positions, including that of housekeeper. If you hire me, I can fix that.”

Lark met his hard stare. Ignoring the way his intense expression made her insides twist into a tight knot of apprehension, she tilted her head. “You need me, Lord Warfield.”

There was a lengthy silence. Every muscle in her body tensed as she waited to discover if her bold impertinence would be punished with a quick dismissal or if her candor would serve her purpose. Being new to London, the lord likely had no idea why he’d had such a difficult time hiring on female servants, but Lark was privy to the fact that the Warfield name had been on a blacklist for many years. There weren’t many women willing to take a position in a household that had been the source of so many rumors even if they had been from more than a decade ago. Though the dark tales had all been in regard to the prior marquess, the current lord’s deceased father, such things had a tendency to linger in the minds of working girls who wished to avoid...perilous situations.

Finally, and slowly, the marquess relaxed into his chair for the first time, lifting a foot to rest the ankle across the opposite knee. Though he remained silent, Lark felt something different emanating from him. His edges seemed less sharp. His manner, less forbidding.

The predator at rest.

“How soon can you start, Mrs. Evans?”

She did not dare show the depths of her relief. “Immediately, my lord.”

“Have you any personal belongings to be fetched?”

She tipped her chin toward the bag at her feet. She thought she detected a flash of surprise in his gaze, but it was gone too fast to be sure.

“You’ll receive fifty pounds a year, paid quarterly. And a few hours will be allotted for your personal use every Sunday.”

Lark nodded. It was a generous wage, but she wasn’t here for the income. The personal hours, however, were invaluable.

Without warning, he rose to his feet in a fluid motion. Lark stood as well and was immediately aware of the man’s significant height and lean strength in comparison to her smaller form. She’d always hated the way her petite stature tended to incite assumptions of helplessness

or fragility. She was neither. But in that moment, as she stood before her new employer, she felt a flicker of vulnerability.

Tilting her head back, she made a conscious effort to meet his cool stare directly. Though she was fully capable of displaying proper deference and respect, she had never been one to cower or simper, and she wouldn't begin with this lord. No matter how intensely intimidating or handsome the man might be.

Handsome? She didn't mean that.

Warfield was intense, dark, cold. Some might see his angular features and crystalline eyes and think them an attractive, potent combination. But not her.

He was a means to an end. Nothing more.

"I'll have a footman show you to your room. You'll begin your duties first thing in the morning."

"I prefer to begin this evening."

His jaw muscles bunched and released again. "If you insist. The accounts are kept in the housekeeper's rooms if you'd like to familiarize yourself with them. Gideon is my butler and can assist with anything else you might require."

Lark nodded in acknowledgment. "And whom shall I report to? I understand there is no lady of the house?"

"There is not."

"A steward then?"

He looked down his nose at her. "I've no steward. You'll report directly to me."

Unusual for the house of a titled lord. But not completely unheard of. Still, the thought of meeting face-to-face with this man on a regular basis gave her pause. For a split second, uncertainty rushed in.

Harriet.

She firmed her resolve and gave another short nod. "As you wish."

The lord's gaze narrowed, briefly dimming the light of his pale eyes. Then he swept his hand in a gesture indicating she should precede him toward the door.

Lark bent to pick up her bag. As she passed by her new employer, sandalwood-scented warmth momentarily enveloped her. It surprised her. She'd not expected a man with the marquess's chilling manner and cool stare to emanate such heat.

As she crossed the study in strong strides, she very distinctly felt the presence of the marquess behind her. When she paused at the closed study door, his large hand reached past her to turn the doorknob. Once again, his scent drifted around her.

A heaviness settled low in her body. She forced herself to ignore it.

The footman who'd shown her in was waiting in the hall.

"Harris, take Mrs. Evans to the housekeeper's rooms."

The male servant gave a dip of his chin in acknowledgment before turning to lead Lark toward the back hallway. She was tempted to glance back at the marquess, but she refrained. She didn't need to look back to know he watched her. She could feel his silent regard.

Lord Warfield was not what she'd expected. But she could handle him. She certainly wasn't going to allow the man's unsettling intensity sway her from her purpose.

Harris brought her to a room tucked in along the back hallway. The way there was dim and narrow, but once she stepped into the space reserved for her to live and work, she managed a full, deep breath. The first she'd taken since entering the Warfield mansion.

Though no lamps were lit, the drapes covering a large garden-level window were thrown open, casting the room in a soft gray light. The room was good-sized. A deep alcove to her left was separated from the rest of the room by a folding privacy screen. Beyond the screen stood a narrow bed, nightstand, and wardrobe. Before the window was a sturdy desk. Shelves lined the wall beside it, holding the account ledgers for household expenses which she'd be in charge of. And across from the desk were a pair of matched armchairs and a tea table angled toward a small brick hearth. A simple braided rug covered the floor.

Turning back to the footman, who'd remained a step outside the door, Lark offered a tight smile. "Thank you, Harris. I understand the butler is named Gideon?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'd like to meet with him as soon as possible. Do you know if that may be arranged?"

"He's likely with the silver at this time of day. I can notify him of your request."

"Thank you."

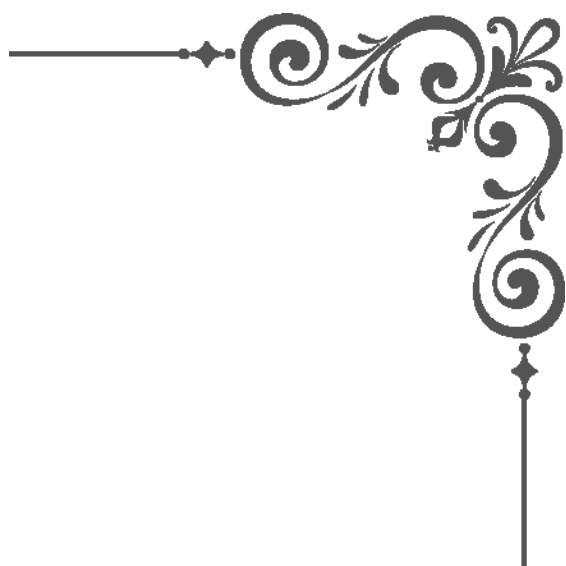
With a respectful nod, the footman turned and strode back down the hall.

As soon as she was alone, Lark released a heavy breath. It wasn't nearly enough to calm the tension claiming her entire body, but it was a moment of relief, at least.

She'd done it.

Crossing to the windows, she linked her fingers tightly together as she looked out over the modest garden. The flowers were clearly overgrown, and the shrubs were badly in need of trimming, but it was lovely in its way. Past the garden were the mews, and beyond that, more walled gardens could be viewed behind an impressive row of aristocratic houses.

Houses that lined Curzon Street.



Chapter Two

Alastair Blackwell crept silently through the narrow passage. He moved by memory as there was no light to guide him. Not even a single flickering candle. The uneven stone floor had become familiar to him over these last few months, and he no longer needed to run his hand along the cold wall to find his way to the door located at the end of the corridor.

He found the latch easily and the door swung silently toward him. After passing through, he closed it firmly then secured the lock that would prevent anyone from following.

Not that anyone ever did.

Alastair was always very careful to ensure his midnight capers remained unobserved.

He made his way up an equally darkened spiral staircase then down another passage that was barely wide enough for the full breadth of his shoulders. His steps were silent as he passed by a couple small doors before reaching the one he wanted. Pausing, he listened for any movement beyond. Though he was confident the servants wouldn't be up and about at such a late hour, he couldn't be too careful. The secret passages he traversed with such regularity needed to remain exactly that.

After ensuring no one was present, he pressed the discreet lever which released the door. Easing it open, he ducked into the darkened library. The concealed wall panel closed silently behind him, securing itself perfectly to remain undetected.

Alastair was about to start across the room when a feeling came over him. An instant conviction. An undeniable truth.

He wasn't alone.

He wasn't sure how he knew it. There was no sound to alert him. No one he could see from where he stood in the darkened corner between the great fireplace and the bookshelves. Remaining in his somewhat concealed location, he scanned the room for anything out of the ordinary.

The curtains covering the cushioned window seat had been drawn back several inches. Just enough for the light of the full moon to cast a pale glow into the room. That in itself was enough to give him pause as the drapes were almost always fully closed.

But there was something else. A feeling. A presence in the silent

space that did not belong.

He waited. Unmoving.

Then...a sigh. Barely perceptible. A moment later, the curtain was swept back from the window seat, and a small figure dressed in a dark frock swung her feet to the floor. Standing quietly, the housekeeper tucked a folded piece of paper into the pocket of her skirt then turned and drew the curtains back over the window. For just a moment, her pale hair, which was drawn back into a bun at her nape, was illuminated by the moonlight, and her features were shown in clear profile.

Then the room went pitch-black.

Tension tightened every muscle in his body as heat flowed swiftly through his blood.

She shouldn't be there.

Not for the first time, he regretted the moment of madness that prompted him to hire the young Mrs. Evans. Though she'd been correct in stating a distinct lack of applicants for the open positions in his female staff, her insolence in bringing up the fact should have been a reason to boot her swiftly out the door. But Alastair had done the opposite. For some reason, the woman's stern assertion of his need for her sparked a flash of admiration. He should have ignored it in the same way he'd managed to disregard the intriguing rebellious spark in her dark gray eyes or the stern angle of her chin.

But once he made the decision to hire her, he couldn't take it back. In the four days since, Mrs. Evans had certainly been busy. Every morning, when she brought him his tea, she'd stand before him with her expression stoic and her posture unwavering. In an efficient and knowledgeable tone, she reported on her progress in hiring new maids, updating the household accounts, and ordering whatever goods she deemed necessary for the proper running of his household.

He didn't question her decisions or suggest adjustments to her approach. Despite her youth and relative lack of experience, running a gentleman's household was certainly more her forte than his. And he had other concerns occupying his mind.

Other than those daily meetings, he never saw the woman. She'd apparently perfected the expectation of being neither seen nor heard, though the evidence of her work was undeniable.

And yet...here she was.

There could be no reason for the woman to be in his library at such an hour. No reason for her to stray so far from her personal rooms so late at night unless it was to accomplish the duties of her station. As far as he was aware, reading correspondence by the light of the moon was not included amongst a housekeeper's necessary tasks. And it made no bloody sense. Surely, the woman had a reading lamp

in her private quarters.

Still caught up in his irritation at Mrs. Evans's presence, he failed to realize she hadn't yet left the room. In fact, once the curtains had been drawn and the room had been thrown into full darkness, she hadn't moved at all.

What on earth was the odd creature about?

Alastair remained still as stone while allowing his available senses to reach out across the lightless room. He sought information. An essence of breath moving through the air, a subtle shifting of energy, a telltale heartbeat. Even in utter stillness, some sound could be detected if one listened carefully enough.

He heard nothing.

Breathing slowly through his nose—so slowly even he could not discern the passing of air into his lungs—he noted her scent still present in the room. The light perfume of early spring flowers mixed with something richer...darker. Amber, perhaps.

"Who's there?"

A delicate shock rolled through his body. Her voice was closer than it should've been. Clear and confident. How in hell had she moved without making a single sound? Her skirts should've rustled; the floor would've creaked. And what of the clink of keys a housekeeper was tasked with carrying about? There should have been something to betray her movement.

The prior marquess had gone through a tremendous amount of trouble to ensure the hidden passages winding through the house were unknown to anyone else. Even servants—who typically knew more about the house they served than their masters. Alastair needed them to remain a secret known only to himself.

Very carefully, he reached behind him to locate and trigger the hidden mechanism with the lightest touch of his fingertips. The panel opened silently, and he immediately stepped back into the blackened corridor. A slight disturbance of air current was all that remained of him once the panel settled back in place.

He could have continued along the passage to another exit far from the trepidatious housekeeper, but he remained there. Waiting. Listening.

After only a moment, there was another near undetectable sigh. That he heard it at all suggested she knew she was alone once again. If she'd wanted to remain silent, he doubted he'd have heard a thing. A moment later, her footsteps and the swish of skirts retreated across the room.

Only then did Alastair continue along the narrow passage, ascending another turning staircase to his private apartments. The book he'd wanted to fetch from the library could wait until tomorrow.

He'd have to be more careful going forward.

In the solitude of his bedroom, he removed his gloves and overcoat then his boots, setting each item carefully aside.

The room had chilled in his absence as had the bath he'd requested some hours ago. Crouching before the coals still flickering in the grate, he added wood and peat to stoke the flames then set the heavy cauldron of cooled water over the fire. It would be a while before it was hot enough to warm his bath, but he was a patient man.

After crossing back to the concealed doorway, he triggered the mechanism to open it. Tucked into the corner just inside the passage was a small wooden box. Withdrawing the box, he carried it with him as he returned to the hearth and took a seat in the leather armchair which had been positioned off to one side to allow space for the oversized bathtub. Setting it on the floor beside him, he opened the box and withdrew a sheaf of papers and a graphite pencil.

He untied the string holding the papers together then shifted through them, going quickly to the end of what had last been written. Lifting one foot, he crossed it over the opposite knee then braced the pages on his thigh. Putting pencil to paper, he furiously yet meticulously wrote down all he'd witnessed on tonight's excursion. Every detail—seemingly pertinent or not—every sight, sound, smell, and texture. He left nothing out in fear his memory might not retain it with such clarity if he failed to record even a small thing. And he had no idea what might or might not be important. In truth, he feared everything was important.

When he finished purging all he'd gathered, he shifted back through the pages to the very beginning and read through what he'd written over the last several weeks. Though he'd created the words himself and reread them every night, he still searched and hoped for some deeper meaning, some clue he might have missed, some connection or direction.

Unfortunately, the mystery he'd set himself to solving had been too cunningly formed and was too fiercely protected. But he couldn't let it go. It drove his very existence. It defined him. He'd never expected his life to take such a disturbing turn, but he was deep in it now, and the only way out was through.

Having grown up on an old estate far from London, Alastair had set eyes on the man who'd sired him only once, when he'd been very young. He didn't recall much about the visit other than the fact that it triggered one of his mother's worst spells. After that, he had no desire to know the man who roused so much pain and anguish.

That was up until a few months ago, when Alastair had been compelled to confront the man over the facts detailed in letters his mother had written but never sent. It took a few inquiries to discover

that after the marquess had been exiled from England more than a decade prior, he'd taken up residence in Venice.

When faced with Alastair's accusations, the reprobate had denied nothing. He'd been proud, in fact, of his past exploits. But before Alastair could take any steps to ensure his father faced proper justice for his crimes, the old marquess died suddenly in the soiled bed of his favorite prostitute.

As his sole heir, Alastair had inherited everything the first Marquess of Warfield left behind. Including the lurid memoir of his life as one of the most degenerate and unabashedly licentious lords London had ever seen.

The rambling writings detailed the secret passages twisting through the Warfield mansion and gave explicit direction on how to access the underground tunnel which extended from the house to an empty carriage house located in the mews beyond the walled garden of the Warfield property. It also described in unnecessarily lascivious detail the activities he and a select group of peers had indulged in for decades prior to the scandal which had ultimately forced the marquess from England. The evil acts were laid out in plain, unadulterated terms by a man who clearly felt no remorse for his wickedness.

To Alastair, they were the words of a monster who'd ruined his mother's life without a moment's regret and, as the memoir claimed, the lives of countless other innocent young women.

His father might have escaped justice, but there were others in their self-called brotherhood who would not be so fortunate. They had the wealth and position to protect them from authorities who'd have very little recourse against men of such high stature, but Alastair had no such limitations. Craving vengeance and justice, Alastair vowed to see all members of the wicked brotherhood exposed for the villainous defilers they truly were.

Despite his sire's candid descriptions when it came to their depravity, he was frustratingly discreet when it came to the names of his fellow reprobates, using initials or other vague descriptors when detailing their many crimes. All he'd noted was that there had been a dozen men in all, of similar social standing and wealth. Based on a few of his stories and the frequent use of the secret tunnel, it was clear that at least some of them had houses in London that were within convenient proximity to each other and to Warfield House.

As soon as Alastair had taken up residence in his sire's prior London townhouse, he'd gone about making the acquaintance of his nearest neighbors. And after months of sleuthing and prying, he'd confirmed the identities of six members of his father's set. But more importantly, he'd happened upon clues that suggested the gentlemen were involved in something more sinister than he'd expected. The

marquess's memoirs waxed poetic about orgies and brothels and sadistic practices explored with unwilling victims, and though his father's former friends and peers still clearly liked to indulge in their preferred pleasures, Alastair had started to suspect their involvement in something decidedly more criminal and undeniably more reprehensible.

Alastair had acquired a slew of random financial records and had diligently scoured any mention of the lords in public and some private documents going back decades. Through hundreds of references and seemingly unconnected estate records, he'd noticed something disconcerting popping up with surprising frequency. At first, he'd tried to brush it off as simple random occurrences or strange coincidence.

But the denial didn't last long.

In the last four years, seven young maids had been reported as missing, and each of them had been employed by one of the known members of his father's lascivious club, whether at a London home or country estate. And none of the women had ever been found. In fact, it didn't appear any investigation at all had been conducted into their sudden disappearances.

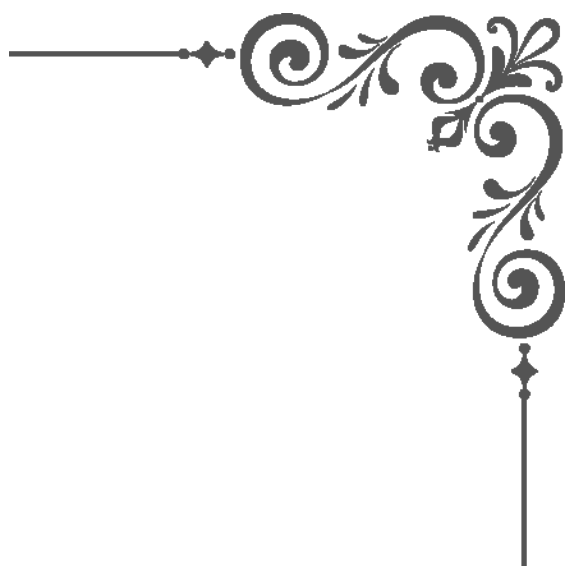
Alastair had no doubt the brotherhood was involved in the fates of these young women, whose numbers could be so much larger if the other, as of yet unidentified, members were found to be associated with similar reports.

Frustration rolled through him. With a muttered curse that burned his throat, he rolled the papers once again to replace them in the back of the box atop the notebook containing his father's lewd scribbles.

He'd discovered the disturbing reports weeks ago but *still* had no physical evidence to support his suspicions, just striking coincidences and suggestive circumstances he couldn't ignore. His vow to avenge his mother had evolved into a near obsession with exposing the noble lords and bringing a final end to the evil thriving right in the heart of London's most elite neighborhood.

Until he destroyed them completely, the so-called *brotherhood* would continue preying upon vulnerable young women. Women like his mother.

He'd bring it all down. Every man. Every house. Every last sordid legacy.



Chapter Three

“I won’t be stayin’. This house ain’t natural. It ain’t!”

Lark fiercely resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Please, Jane, calm down. I assure you, there’s nothing to fear.”

The near-hysterical maid ignored her as she placed her meager possessions into a scarf before tying it up. Lark had come looking for the girl after she met with the other housemaids that morning to go over their duties for the day and noticed the new hire was missing. She found Jane preparing to flee.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Evans—truly—but spirits roam these halls. I felt ’em last night. And I won’t be stickin’ ’round to become one o’ their victims.”

Though she couldn’t entirely discount what the girl was claiming—there was a certain feeling of oppressive unease in the household—she couldn’t afford the loss of a maid she’d only recently hired. If whispers of ghosts and spirits started to fly through the servant gossip mill, she’d have an even harder time getting the help she needed.

“I assure you there are no spirits in this house. I was walking around late last night myself and encountered no ghostly forms. No doubt it was my movements you heard.”

The young maid pushed past Lark with a mutinous chin and the light of fear still in her eyes. “I ain’t takin’ the chance, ma’am.”

Lark sighed as she watched the only experienced maid who’d applied in the last week walk out the door.

Then with a low sound of resignation, she turned on her heel and headed toward the linen cupboard. She’d need to gather a few things before going upstairs to the lord’s private quarters. There were only three other upstairs maids, and they’d all been tasked with scrubbing down and airing out the seven other bedrooms, something she’d guess hadn’t been done in more than a decade. She didn’t intend to interrupt them from such an arduous task.

It was a good thing she already had her other morning tasks completed as she’d have to see to the lord herself. Having spent her childhood in one of the East End’s roughest neighborhoods, Lark was well-accustomed to making do on very little sleep. And though she’d been up late the night before, she’d also arisen long before the sun—and long before anyone else in the house had stirred. Still, after glancing at her watch, she noted there was only just enough time to

wake the marquess and get back to the kitchen to prepare his tea while he went about his morning ablutions. Luckily, he preferred to take his tea down in his study while reading the paper rather than first thing in his bedroom.

Since the marquess did not rise until well into the day and without a housekeeper to keep them to a proper schedule, the few housemaids on staff had gotten in the habit of keeping later hours themselves. It was the first thing she'd addressed when she'd come on staff. And though they'd grumbled at first, since they wished to keep their positions, the women complied to the new schedule.

Just because she was here for an ulterior purpose did not mean she intended to shirk her duties. And to be truthful, the entire house was long overdue for a deep cleaning.

While researching her employer in preparation for her interview, she'd learned that prior to the current Marquess of Warfield's arrival in London only a few months ago, the Warfield townhouse had stood empty while the previous marquess had resided on the Continent. That meant every member of the current staff had been in their positions for only a handful of months. Which also meant it was unlikely they'd have had time to gather much gossip about the other residents in the neighborhood. A disappointment, since servants were the best agents of information to be found. Luckily, there were other ways to gain the knowledge she sought.

Outside the lord's bedchamber, she paused and lifted the watch that hung from a loop at her waist opposite the ring of keys she carried to signify her station. She was a few minutes early. Stepping back from the door, she adjusted her hold on the basket of items she'd brought with her and resigned herself to waiting for the designated hour.

She could hear the distant, muffled movements and low murmurs of the other maids as they scrubbed the floors in a nearby room. The steps of a footman could faintly be heard descending the servants' stairs, likely on some task assigned by the butler.

Though they'd only spoken very briefly in the days she'd been here, Remus Gideon had proven to be like so many British butlers. Somber, imperious, and very possibly older than the medieval tapestry that hung in the library. She suspected there was a chink somewhere in his very proper armor, and though she hadn't discovered it yet, she would.

Checking her watch again, she noted she had another thirty seconds.

Turning her focus to the room beyond the closed door, she listened for any movement to ascertain if the marquess had already risen. She'd spent enough years as an upstairs maid to understand the

importance of being as prepared as possible for what you might encounter beyond a closed door.

She heard nothing.

Silently and efficiently, she opened the door and stepped inside. After closing the door behind her, she paused to allow her eyes to adjust to the much darker room. Spotting the faint glow in the grate, she set her basket down and went first to add fuel and stoke the fire. Working efficiently through tasks that had been ingrained into her being over thousands of mornings like this, she made sure the fire was tended before moving toward the windows. With swift and decisive movements, she swept the drapes back to allow the gray light of another cloudy day to spread into the room. Often, that was enough to awaken an occupant.

But there was no stirring from the bed.

The bed she'd intently avoided glancing toward despite the strange urge she'd had to do exactly that from the moment she'd entered. It was unprecedented. She had no business being curious what the lord of the house might look like abed.

After retrieving the basket, she went next to the valet stand to set up everything that would be needed for the marquess's morning shave. Then she crossed back toward the fireplace and went about collecting the items left from his bath the night before—the towel which had been carefully folded and draped over the rim of the tub, the washing cloth, also neatly folded, the small cake of soap in its silver dish.

When she turned to survey the room for anything else that might require her attention, she could no longer avoid looking at the large four-poster bed. Nor could she ignore the man sitting at the edge of the mattress.

She immediately braced herself for the inevitable reaction. An icy chill followed by a slow-rolling wave of heat. No matter how hard she tried to block her visceral response to the marquess, it claimed her against her will. Every time. All she could do was hold herself still and wait for the feeling to pass.

Unfortunately, it never really did. The heat, anyway. It just remained a low smolder beneath the surface of her skin until she could leave his presence and properly distract herself.

It was frustrating. And unsettling.

Gratefully, he was gazing toward the windows rather than in her direction. His bare feet were planted wide on the carpet as he leaned forward, resting his elbows on his spread knees. She realized with a start that if not for the sheet he'd pulled across his lap, he'd have been completely naked to her view.

As a child of the rookery, where prostitutes plied their trade in

back alleys against whatever surface they happened to be near and children bathed in drain ditches in the street, Lark had witnessed a fair share of nakedness. And as a maid, she'd seen numerable men in varying states of dress and undress. Nudity was not something that typically gave her pause.

But she was fairly certain she'd never seen a body like Warfield's.

Lean muscled and broad shouldered—even slouched as he was—he exuded efficient strength. This was not the body of a soft and pampered aristocrat. In fact, there didn't appear to be an ounce of softness anywhere on the man. And when he lifted a hand to rub at the black bristled hair growth on his jaw, Lark found herself transfixed by the play of muscles in his arms and those woven along his rib cage.

“Blasted rain. Again.”

The lord's muttered curse of annoyance managed to shake Lark from her momentary lapse in propriety.

“Is there anything else you require, my lord?”

Cool blue eyes angled toward her. For a second, he appeared to tense. But it was such a subtle thing, she wasn't sure if she'd imagined it. There was no denying, however, the sharp intensity of his gaze cutting across the room.

“Mrs. Evans.”

His voice was quiet. Sleep-roughened.

Her nape tingled.

“Where's the maid?”

“Jane, who was assigned to awaken you, left her position this morning. Mary, Bridget, and Tess are occupied with other duties, my lord.” There was a pause while he said nothing in response. Just continued to stare at her from beneath black arching brows. Lark glanced to the valet stand. “I've set out your shaving accoutrements. I understand you've no valet?”

“Correct.”

“Are you looking to hire one?” It was really none of her business since the domain of male servants fell to the butler, and a gentleman's valet would have been even beyond Gideon's authority. For some reason, she couldn't keep from imagining the marquess standing at the mirror as he ran the edge of a blade along his sharp jaw, and the thought triggered another wave of heat through her body.

His eyes narrowed. “I enjoy my privacy too much for a personal manservant, Mrs. Evans.”

The message in his statement was clear; at present, *she* was the one encroaching upon his privacy.

“Of course, my lord. Your tea will be waiting for you in the study.”

Something flickered in his eyes. “I'll take my tea in the library this morning.”

The change was unexpected, but it was not her place to wonder at it. "As you wish. Would you like breakfast brought to you there as well?"

"No breakfast, Mrs. Evans."

Lark curtsied again then headed for the door. It was the same every morning. Tea but no breakfast. Some mornings he went for a ride, and if so, he'd call for a bath on his return. Then a change of clothes and a quick lunch before heading out to do whatever lords did about town.

Cook, a tall and formidable woman near forty years in age with pale red hair and liberally freckled skin, had complained to Lark more than once how her talents were wasted in such a household where breakfasts and formal dinners were nonexistent and lunch was barely appreciated.

Before she could slip from the lord's room, he stopped her in the threshold with a hard-voiced, "Mrs. Evans."

She turned to see he'd risen from the bed and slipped on a black velvet robe while her back had been turned.

"I expect a full upstairs staff by the end of the week. Increase the offered wage if you must." He paused and glanced down as he finished tying the sash of his robe around a trim waist. "Do not to come to my bedroom again, Mrs. Evans. You're the housekeeper, not a common maid. Do you understand?"

He met her gaze again with his last word. His eyes were cold and hard.

Something clenched tight inside her, but she couldn't quite identify it. Meeting his stare with a proud expression, she dipped another quick curtsy. "Perfectly, my lord."

Then she left, closing the door silently behind her.

Arsehole.

The word came to mind before she could stop it, but she wouldn't take it back. Not when it was so applicable.

Tea being a particular luxury, especially when the blend was as fine as the marquess enjoyed, meant it was stored in a locked box to which only the housekeeper had access. Of all the responsibilities assigned to the housekeeper of a grand household, the making of tea was Lark's favorite. There was a sort of earthy magic to the ritualistic task. The slow heating of water, the sifting and crushing of the leaves. The precisely timed steeping to bring out the right balance of strength and flavor. And lastly, the artful presentation. Not that her current employer was the type to appreciate such fine details.

As expected, by the time she carried the laden tray to the library, the marquess was already there. Dressed all in black as was his preference even for day wear, with his strong-angled jaw cleanly

shaven, he had taken a seat in a chair before the fire. His elbows were propped on the curved armrests, and one ankle was crossed over the opposite knee as he perused the morning paper, which had been properly pressed by the butler and arranged on the table beside him.

As she made her way across the somber library, Lark experienced the same reaction she always had when in his presence, but it was accompanied by a visceral memory from the night before.

It had been well after two o'clock in the morning when, unable to sleep, she'd felt a need to escape the silence of her room. Warfield's library had intrigued her from the first moment she'd seen it. The dark paneling, rich colors, and the scent of leatherbound books. She'd crept through the still and darkened house to ensconce herself behind the curtains surrounding the window seat, where she'd reread Harriet's note by the light of the moon. She could hear her friend's voice—as familiar to her as her own—as though she read the short missive out loud. She heard the sorrow and fear and determination Harriet must have felt as she'd hastily penned the words.

As always, the note strengthened Lark's purpose and fired her determination.

Being hired as Warfield's housekeeper had certainly gotten her closer to Curzon Street, but she was still no closer to learning what had happened to sweet Harriet or where her friend had gone. The truth of that was what kept her up at night and fueled her through the days. But she needed to do more.

Last night, sorrow and frustration at her lack of progress had threatened to consume her.

But the moment she'd risen from her safe little corner and the curtains had closed behind her, blocking the moonlight, a very different feeling had claimed her awareness.

Lark had always felt a sort of communion with the night. When she'd been a small and destitute child running the streets of the East End, darkness and shadow so often contained hidden dangers. To survive, she'd had to force herself to make them her own. In the darkness, she'd learned to disappear. She'd learned to listen and feel.

So, she'd known without a doubt she hadn't been alone in the library last night. She'd felt another presence like a low murmur in the night. She'd felt... Warfield.

And a moment later, she'd felt his absence.

Stopping now, beside the lord's chair, she glanced up to the far corner of the room where a shadowed little alcove was formed between the stone fireplace and the bookshelves. It was a small space, perhaps two feet across, barely a foot deep. But big enough for a man.

"Mrs. Evans."

The marquess's voice sent a fever chill through her body, starting

at her crown and tumbling like dancing fire to her fingertips and toes. Doing all she could to show no outward evidence of her reaction, Lark shifted her attention to her employer.

His expression was heavy and forbidding. The darkest she'd seen it. And his eyes—they pierced straight through her stoic façade. The force of his stare seemed to swirl about in her center. Seeking. Altering.

“Yes, my lord?”

“Do you intend to stand there staring into the corner all day?”

Concealing the prick of irritation his sharp tone inspired, Lark stepped forward to set the tray on the low table in front of his chair. “Shall I pour?”

He gave a short wave of his hand. His attention had already returned to the newspaper in his hands.

Lark poured the tea—strong and dark, as he preferred—then added the appropriate amount of honey. No sugar. No cream. With a straight spine, she set the cup and saucer on the table at his side.

“If there is nothing else—”

“You may go,” he interrupted.

Though annoyance at his curt manner burned in her chest, she turned and walked away. She'd served people who had been far ruder and more obnoxious than the marquess could ever be. She'd never let it bother her. She had a job to perform and that was what she did.

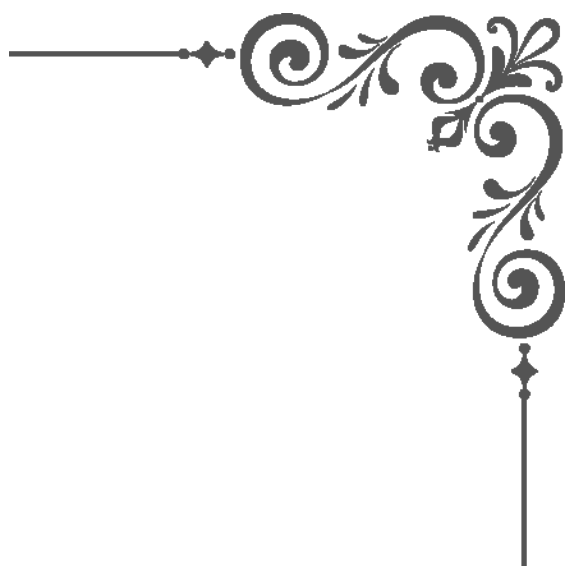
The marquess's cold demeanor and sharp tone were trifling things to endure if they put her within reach of the answers she sought.

From the library, she went to the upper rooms to check in on the maids' progress. Though the women had gotten used to a more careless approach to their duties, they were learning quickly that Lark expected more from them. They'd soon be in top form.

From there, she returned to her rooms, where she wrote up another advertisement for the servant pages. The household needed at least one more upstairs maid and two downstairs just to make the house properly functional. More, if the marquess ever decided to take a wife and start a family, though such a thing was difficult to imagine.

The terse and broody marquess as a father? A dreadful thought.

Either way, Lark didn't expect to be there long enough for any of that. As soon as she found Harriet, she'd be gathering her savings and getting them both out of London.



Chapter Four

The woman was an oddity. For all her prim and proper poise and obvious experience in domestic work, she was not at all what a housekeeper should be.

Mrs. Evans might have managed to convince her previous employers that she possessed a staid, subservient manner, but Alastair wasn't the least bit fooled. That first day when she'd stood in his study, her somber dress and woolen coat drenched from the rain, he'd known by the steady self-assurance in the woman's winter-gray eyes she was more than she tried to appear. And then she'd proven it with her bold assertion that he needed her.

She hadn't been wrong.

In the week since he'd hired her, his home had begun to run more smoothly. The dust of the past and echoes of the house's prior resident were being stirred up by the swift steps and lively chatter of the maids as they went about refreshing the entire townhouse under Mrs. Evans's formidable instruction.

If her youth had ever been a concern, it was no longer a thought. His housekeeper had more ingrained authority in her little finger than many women twice her age.

That wasn't the issue.

The issue was what he sensed beneath her proper veneer of competence and efficiency. There was a force driving the young Mrs. Evans. It was evident in those brief moments when she couldn't quite hide her impatience or the hint of distraction in her gaze that often coupled with a deep furrow in her otherwise smooth brow.

But whatever her internal worries, they were not the least bit his concern. And also not the issue at hand.

He'd requested his tea in the library this morning for a very specific purpose—to see if the scene of last night's near-encounter would induce a response. The answer was troubling.

Her gaze had gone straight to the well-disguised hidden passage. The focus and certainty in her searching stare suggested she was not the type to disregard the experience as a flight of her own fancy. And though he couldn't imagine what had drawn her attention to his presence last night, it proved his concern about needing to be even more circumspect in his nightly movements than he was already.

Dammit. Perhaps he should dismiss the woman and seek a

replacement. One with a duller gaze and an even duller manner.

Even as he had the thought, he rejected it. He'd gone too many long months without a single qualified candidate for the position. No doubt he'd have just as much trouble—if not more—should he decide to reject the only woman who'd stepped forward in all this time. And he was pretty damned certain he knew exactly why he'd had so few applicants.

His father's scribbled memoirs had not been limited to descriptions of the entertainments enjoyed amongst the so-called brotherhood. They also detailed his inclinations toward his own female staff. The reprobate had been shameless and utterly undiscerning. His lascivious nature had eventually led to a dalliance with a woman of greater standing in society who possessed a family with the power and position. When they'd demanded satisfaction for his lascivious behavior, his punishment had been exile.

Considering what Alastair knew of his father's relentless pursuits, he could understand why female servants might be reluctant or downright fearful of taking a position in the Marquess of Warfield's home. Even if he declared to the world he was nothing like his sire, why should anyone believe him when he couldn't quite believe it himself?

Setting aside the paper, Alastair rose to his feet. In long strides, he crossed the antique rug to stand before the fireplace. As he stared into the dancing flames with his hands clasped tightly behind his back, his mother's voice resonated eerily through his mind, like that of a haunting specter he could not evade and would likely never escape.

The evil will consume you, Alastair. I see it in your eyes—his eyes. I can't bear it.

Familiar tangled threads of hatred, guilt, and sorrow twisted and knotted inside him. Fury and disgust welled. The pressure was nearly unmanageable.

Alastair had been told all his life that the man who'd sired him was on par with the devil himself. When he was young, his mother's disturbed rantings had terrified him. As he'd gotten older, he'd come to understand that her mind and heart had been irreversibly scarred. And the only thing he'd known to do to help her was stay out of her sight and hope she found some peace from no longer having a constant reminder of her torment. It wasn't until her death that he'd finally learned the full truth of what she'd endured at the hands of his father.

Deep breaths eventually eased the ache inside him, tightening it into a dense ball he could hide in the pit of his soul.

He would *not* be consumed by the evil in which his father had reveled.



LATER THAT NIGHT, ALASTAIR sat nursing a glass of whisky in a shadowed corner of his club, of which a Lord Lowndes also happened to be a member.

Lowndes had a residence not far from Warfield. Just one street over. They'd met at a party hosted by Lord Marlowe, yet another neighbor, and had encountered each other again at the Lord Hazelton's house and the Earl of Altham's. Though Lowndes was significantly younger than the other suspected members of the brotherhood, Alastair had gotten the distinct impression that the lord was one of them.

There had been too many sly comments from the man, too much innuendo when he'd inquired about Alastair's preferences when it came to gentlemanly diversions. And far too many whispered conversations with the known members of the brotherhood had been witnessed from across dinner tables and billiard rooms.

Alastair was hoping to further their acquaintance tonight.

He'd been at the club for a couple hours now and had yet to spot the man. Already having extended his social experience beyond his usual comfort level in all the small talk and introductions he'd been forced to endure so far this evening, Alastair was just about to leave when Lowndes strolled into the club's drawing room.

Luckily, the other man spied him almost immediately. His smile was almost crafty as he crossed the room to Alastair's private table.

"My Lord Warfield," he noted smoothly, "what a pleasure."

Alastair rose to his feet. "Hello, Lowndes. I wasn't aware you were a member of this club." An easy lie.

Black brows arched over small dark eyes as Lowndes gestured to the empty chair at the table. "Would you mind if I joined you?"

"Not at all."

As the gentlemen took their seats, a footman brought a snifter of brandy to Lowndes's waiting hand. The lord didn't bother to mutter a thank-you as he eyed Alastair across the table.

"You know, I'm rather pleased to run into you, Warfield."

"Are you?" Alastair swept a casual gaze about the room, as though slightly bored.

"Indeed. You see, I have a way of reading people and I've long suspected something about you."

The look in the man's black eyes—pretentious and smug—nearly had Alastair curling his hand into a fist. But he managed to eye the man with a suggestion of curiosity. "And what is that?"

Lowndes leaned forward with a conspiratorial air. "I recognize the look in your eyes. You're seeking something. Something beyond the

typical diversions with which we attempt to distract ourselves. And you've been unsuccessful in finding it, haven't you?"

"That's a specific and rather intrusive observation," he replied coolly, hoping to gently force the other man's hand.

But Lowndes simply leaned back in his chair and swirled his brandy. As he stared into the amber liquor as it spun about in the snifter, his mouth lifted at the corners. "I know I'm right because I was once just like you. In possession of a newly inherited title and all the wealth a man could dream of. In desperate need of some worthy pursuit to balance out the drudgery of duty and responsibility. Something that goes beyond the dull entertainments so many gentlemen satisfy themselves with."

Anticipation pricked at Alastair's nape. But he arched a disdainful brow. "I assure you I've thoroughly explored all manner of entertainments London has to offer."

"Have you? Really? What if I said I could guide you to pleasures you haven't even imagined?"

Though it was certainly possible Lowndes was talking about something entirely unconnected to the brotherhood, Alastair's instincts told him otherwise. A long moment passed as he openly assessed the other man before he allowed a slow smile to widen his mouth. "I'd have to say that my imagination is quite good."

"Perhaps," Lowndes allowed. The lord's arrogance was as thick as his hair pomade. But then he leaned forward with a conspiratorial glimmer in his gaze. "But have you ever had an opportunity to *fully* explore your most base desires?"

Alastair narrowed his gaze but didn't reply.

Lowndes lowered his voice. "Have you ever wondered what it might be like to simply indulge your secret primitive urges and experience the pleasures our civilized society has deemed...unacceptable?"

Alastair arched a brow and met the other man's dark stare. "I'm not sure I know what you mean."

Lowndes leaned back again in his chair, a smirk curving his mouth. "Ah, but you're intrigued. I knew you would be. I'll be hosting a private party in the coming week. Just a small taste of what I'm talking about. I think you'd enjoy it."

Alastair took a long swallow of his drink to hide his anticipation. This could be exactly what he'd been waiting for. Then he gave a quick smile. "If that's an invitation, I accept."

Lowndes grinned as he lifted his brandy. "You'd be a fool not to."



ALASTAIR AWOKE THE next morning to one of the upstairs maids

opening the drapes and stirring the coals in the grate. He ignored the prick of disappointment at not seeing the small, dark figure of Mrs. Evans moving silently about. The sight of his housekeeper within the privacy of his bedroom the previous morning had caught him off guard and unprepared to completely contain the physical response she unknowingly invoked.

At least the woman had heeded his instruction to ensure there was not a reoccurrence.

He waited until the maid finished her tasks and left his bedroom before rising. A glance out the window suggested it'd be a good morning for a ride. The fresh air would be a welcome change from the dark passages and oppressive drawing rooms he'd been haunting of late.

As expected, the ride refreshed him and helped fortify his mood in preparation for the evening. Unfortunately, his newfound clarity brought along the realization that he'd failed to advise Mrs. Evans he was expecting guests for dinner.

After bathing the scent of horse and sweat from his body, he went down to his study, where he rang for his tea. Mrs. Evans arrived only a few minutes later. His housekeeper must have had eyes watching for his return to have the tea so promptly prepared.

Instead of sitting in his chair with the newspaper as usual, Alastair stood before the fire.

The alteration of his routine didn't seem to bother the woman, however, as she continued forward, expertly balancing the laden tray in her hands. She kept her gaze trained forward and slightly down as she approached to set the tray on the tea table between them.

"Shall I pour?" she asked. Just as she always did.

"Please."

He'd never witnessed the little ritual she performed as he'd always made an effort to focus on whatever article he was reading rather than his housekeeper. But he watched her now, as she bent forward to arrange a cup and saucer, then lifted the small porcelain teapot to pour a measured amount before finally adding the perfect amount of honey to sweeten the dark brew just how he liked it. After stirring with a silver teaspoon—three gentle circles—she set the spoon aside and lifted the cup and saucer in her hands.

The level grace and steadiness of her movements seemed an almost poetic thing. Her gaze finally lifted to meet his as she carried the tea to him, and Alastair's muscles tensed with a subtle anticipation. As he did so often, he sensed a spark of challenge in her eyes. But as soon as the impertinence was detected, it was gone. Replaced by proper deference.

She transferred the cup and saucer carefully into his larger hands,

making sure their skin did not make contact. Then she stepped back and linked her fingers at her waist.

“Would you like breakfast brought to you here?”

“No breakfast, Mrs. Evans.”

His reply, the same as it had been each day she asked about serving a morning meal, inspired a new reaction in the woman this time. It wasn’t much, just a purposeful inhale and a tilt of her head.

“If I may make a suggestion, my lord?”

Alastair raised a brow. This was new. But he was feeling magnanimous after his ride, so he gave a short nod.

“Your cook, Mrs. Reynard, is highly trained and possesses a great love and appreciation for her work. She has a particular magic with jams. Her rose preserves are truly inspired.” She paused and that subtle light of challenge reappeared in her gaze. “It would be a shame if she were ever to decide her exceptional talents would be better utilized elsewhere.”

A feeling akin to amusement spread through Alastair’s chest. He carefully concealed it and furrowed his brow instead. “Are you saying, Mrs. Evans, that my cook is growing bored?”

The housekeeper’s gaze didn’t even flicker as she replied, “I’m only saying you might enjoy sampling more of what she is capable of producing in the kitchens.”

The housekeeper was manipulating him. And none too subtly, either. Yet she didn’t appear the slightest bit remorseful about it.

“I shall consider your suggestion,” he noted finally. She nodded, as though his compliance was guaranteed. But when she prepared to leave, he stopped her. “Mrs. Evans.”

She turned back to face him, and though her movements were obedient, he sensed a fine hint of tension in the woman.

He frowned. “I’ll be having a couple guests for dinner tonight. From what you’ve said, I’m sure Mrs. Reynard will have no trouble providing an impressive meal despite the late notice.”

“I’ve no doubt she’ll be delighted to do so, my lord.”

“Excellent.”

“Is there anything else, my lord?”

Alastair paused, as though giving the question full thought. He even raised his teacup for a sip, blowing away the steam before putting the porcelain to his lips. He met the housekeeper’s gaze as the dark, sweet tea bathed his tongue.

She stared back at him. Enduring and silent. The virtual epitome of a proper servant awaiting her master’s will. But for a brief flashing moment, he saw the truth in her eyes. More than impatience or impertinence, it was...awareness. A quiet acceptance of something he wasn’t sure he’d fully acknowledged yet.

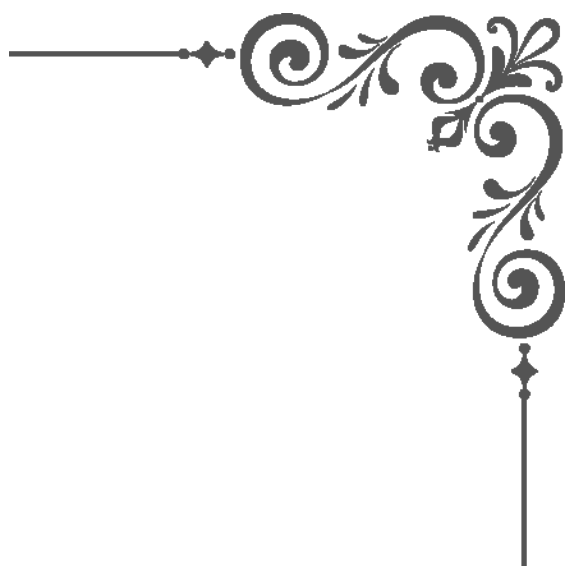
His blood heated and rushed through his body in a swift awakening.

Blast.

“That’s all,” he muttered curtly, needing the woman gone before his physical reaction became noticeable.

She lowered her gaze and gave a curtsy before striding swiftly from the room. But even after she’d left, Alastair remained tense and frustrated. A sexual attraction to his housekeeper was utterly unacceptable.

And—it seemed—utterly undeniable.



Chapter Five

A curt knock on Lark's door drew her attention from the ledger she was updating. The interruption was unexpected but welcome. Keeping the household accounts was a dull and unpleasant practice. Anything that might take her away from it, even for a moment, was fine with her.

"Come in."

The door opened to reveal the butler's tall and ancient form.

"Pardon the intrusion, Mrs. Evans." His words were always slow and deliberate, as were his movements. As though everything he did had been carefully thought out to the tiniest detail and was executed with precise care.

Lark rose to her feet and stepped out from behind her desk to stand beside it. Taking her cue from the senior servant's supremely formal manner, she replied in a like tone. "Not at all, Mr. Gideon. Welcome." As the older senior servant stepped across the threshold, he made sure to keep the door wide open behind him. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"I understand you are likely busy," he noted with a flicker of his gaze to the open ledger on her desk, "but if I might have just a moment of your time."

"Of course. Please, sit down." She gestured to the pair of armchairs positioned before the fire.

The butler approached the nearest chair and waited for Lark to join him and take her seat before claiming his own. When he did, he was stiff-backed and stern jawed. His hands rested evenly on his knees and his gaze was directed slightly downward.

The epitome of decorum and propriety. As a butler should be.

But Lark noticed a telltale twitch of suppressed curiosity at the corner of one eyebrow and the way his pinky finger of his left hand seemed desperate to start tapping.

He was not so contained as he appeared.

She smiled. "To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, Mr. Gideon?"

A gaze shadowed by the heavy bush of thick iron-gray eyebrows lifted to meet hers. Clearing his throat, he took his time forming his words.

Lark waited patiently.

“Mrs. Evans, you’ve been in our household for more than a week now,” he stated as though the fact might be news to her. When she didn’t respond, he nodded then continued. “For obvious reasons, I admit to having doubts about you in the beginning.” His gaze flickered over her face and person as he spoke, making it clear what those reasons were.

Lark forced herself not to roll her eyes. Old men would always see youth and femininity as a detriment in matters of skill and aptitude. Again, she said nothing, allowing the butler to speak his piece in his own time.

And a few moments later, he did.

“But I’ve witnessed your dedication to your duties and your efficient manner in managing your responsibilities.”

When he paused this time, Lark tilted her head and gave a short smile. “Thank you, Mr. Gideon. I appreciate the acknowledgment.”

The older man nodded in return. Then his spine softened, and he shifted to rest his elbows on the armrests. As his eyes swept around her room, she realized he had not yet gotten to his true purpose.

“You keep a lovely room, Mrs. Evans.”

“Thank you.” The room looked exactly as it had the first day she’d walked in. Her only personal belongings were tucked into the old wardrobe behind the screen by her bed.

As his attention slid over her empty tea table for the third time, realization and inspiration struck.

“Mr. Gideon, may I offer you a bit of refreshment?”

The man’s eyes sparked. “Oh, that’s not necessary. I’ve no desire to be a bother.”

Rising to her feet, she brushed off his clearly reluctant refusal. “Tis no bother at all. And I think I’ve just the thing for such a blustery day.”

Crossing to the small cupboard beside her desk, she took out a pair of teacups and saucers then slipped a small bottle—which she kept on hand for exactly this type of occasion—into the pocket of her skirt. She returned to her guest and carefully set the cups on the table between their chairs.

“I’m afraid I cannot offer you tea since I haven’t yet had an opportunity to purchase a personal supply,” she explained apologetically. “I do, however, have something a bit better.”

When she withdrew the bottle of Scottish whisky from her pocket and poured a healthy splash into each of their cups, the old man’s lips curved into a slow grin.

Rheumy eyes met hers. “Mrs. Evans, I do believe we’re going to get along quite well, indeed.”

The unexpectedly effusive words inspired a chuckle as she handed

the man his cup then took her seat. It appeared she'd found the man's weakness.

After a quiet moment as they both enjoyed the potent spirits, the butler cleared his throat once again.

"Mrs. Evans, forgive me, but I must broach a rather sensitive topic." The reluctance in his tone was tinged with a sort of protectiveness that sparked her curiosity.

"Please, go on."

Thick brows lowered as he leaned forward. "I'm sure you're aware of the fact that this household once had a rather dark mark against it."

Lark nodded. She'd heard all the rumors before applying. Although the details were old and rather shrouded, it was well known that the prior marquess had been a debauched and wicked hedonist. The type of gentleman who believed his female servants to be his own personal harem. He'd left England abruptly some years ago and died somewhere on the Continent just before the current marquess took up residence.

Although it was certainly possible the son took after his father in such proclivities, he hadn't been in London long enough for any rumors to that effect to take hold. And Lark hadn't seen any evidence of such behavior herself.

The butler took another healthy sip before curving his long spine to relax a bit in his chair.

"When I accepted a position under our current lord some months ago, it was on a tentative basis." His dark eyes flashed with surprising vigor. "I would never serve a house of ill repute, but I was willing to form an opinion of the heir separate from his sire."

Lark raised a brow. She hadn't expected such an open-minded viewpoint from the pompous servant.

"He's a gloomy gentleman to be sure," he continued, "but I've only ever witnessed him to behave with utmost propriety."

"That's good to hear," Lark replied, though she wasn't sure *gloomy* was the word she'd use to describe their mutual employer. *Brooding* seemed a far more fitting descriptor. Or *enigmatic*. Or *fascinating*.

No, not that. Certainly not that.

"What else do you know of him?"

The butler sighed heavily, and Lark leaned forward to add a bit more to his teacup. His smile was grateful. "Not much, I'm afraid. Only that he came into the title less than six months ago. Rumor has it no one knew the prior marquess even had a son. The current lord showed up in London shortly after his sire's death. No one knew where he came from or where he'd been, but he certainly hadn't grown up in his father's household."

It would appear Mr. Gideon was a bit of a gossip. Perfect.

Lark widened her eyes to hide her smile. "Are there doubts to his legitimacy?"

He shook his head. "I understand it was all properly proven. Something about a secret marriage of some sort." The butler waved his hand. "It's all a bit beyond me."

Interesting.

Lark considered what the senior servant revealed. She doubted there was any connection between the marquess and Harriet's disappearance since he'd only recently arrived in town, but there was clear mystery surrounding the man, and it was undeniably intriguing.

"My point in all this, Mrs. Evans, is to say that with you here to take an effective hand in the running of things, I feel it an appropriate time to offer a few referrals."

Lark blinked. "Referrals?"

A soft look came over the aged man's craggy features. "I've the honor of being grandfather to three girls—all well trained and proper young women—who are looking for new positions. My eldest granddaughter, Lizelle, has been an upstairs maid for several years. Her younger sister, Philippa, has been coming along nicely, as well. And their cousin, Sadie, is still quite young but already has a few years' experience as scullery maid. I'm sure you'll find each of them a proper fit for this household. They can provide complete references, of course, but more importantly, I will vouch for them myself."

Though family referrals were not an uncommon occurrence, she hadn't expected such to come from this stoic man. Apparently, whisky loosened up more than the old man's tongue.

"I'd be happy to review your granddaughters' references, Mr. Gideon, but I cannot make any promises."

"Of course, Mrs. Evans, I completely understand. The matter is fully in your hands, and I'd never presume to overstep my authority with you on this matter or any other," he asserted and she believed him. "But they're qualified and honest and hardworking girls. Even so, I wouldn't have recommended them to you or this household if I didn't feel confident in your management."

And the safety of their virtues.

The last was an unspoken understanding gleaned from the butler's opening rhetoric.

Lark gave a nod and a quick smile. "I shall certainly take your recommendations into account."

"Many thanks, Mrs. Evans," the butler expressed with a hint of genuine emotion. Then he glanced down at his cup—the delicate porcelain cradled carefully in his arthritic hands—with a sigh of disappointment. "I'm afraid my cup's gone dry. Won't you offer just

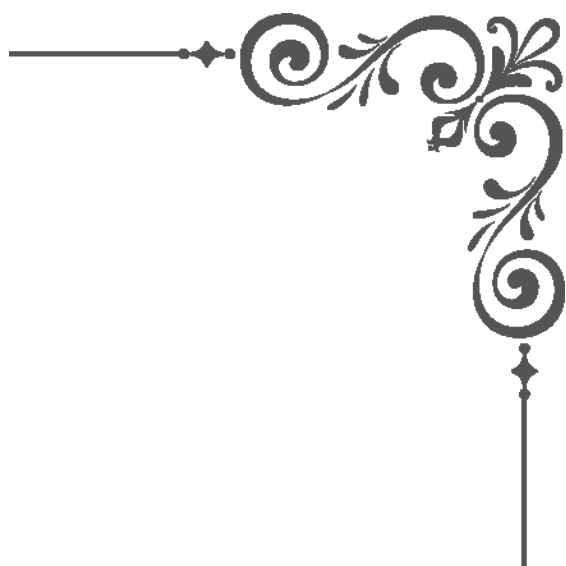
another splash?”

The hopeful look in his eyes was almost sweet. And it did the trick as Lark leaned forward with a smile to pour a bit more into both their cups.

“You know, I find this area of London rather fascinating,” she said casually as she eased back in her chair. “And I’ve found it to be prudent, when entering a new household, to learn all I can about the neighborhood.”

The butler nodded sagely. “A wise endeavor.”

“So, tell me, Mr. Gideon, have you learned anything of interest about Warfield’s neighboring households?”



Chapter Six

Alastair stood in front of his mirror, angling his chin to swipe the razor along the underside of his jaw. His finest evening wear was laid out on the bed behind him. Dinner wasn't to be a particularly formal affair, but when a duke's daughter came to call, one didn't skimp on decorum.

Lady Katherine Blackwell, Alastair's cousin, was being escorted tonight by her bodyguard and soon-to-be husband, Mason Hale, a seasoned East End bruiser of undefeatable skill. Alastair had met Lady Katherine and Hale only twice before and not under the best of circumstances.

By no fault of their own, Lady Katherine and her younger brother, the current Duke of Northmoor, had become embroiled in a scheme perpetuated by Lord Shelbourne, a confirmed member of the brotherhood. Having first learned of his cousins' entanglement with Lord Shelbourne shortly before the prior marquess's death, Alastair hadn't understood the full threat to the Blackwell siblings until sometime later. By the time he'd located them, they'd already hired the former bare-knuckle boxer as a formidable bodyguard.

Unfortunately, Shelbourne had been obsessively invested in his nefarious plot to develop a special drug that could put a person into a dreamlike state while keeping their physical functionality intact. The prior Duke of Northmoor had been known for his extensive knowledge of herbology and chemistry. Shelbourne had deceived and manipulated Northmoor into working for him. When the duke suspected Shelbourne's ignoble purpose, he was killed and his work was stolen.

But Shelbourne couldn't get the formula to work on his own, so he decided to force assistance from the duke's young heir, who was reported to be an even greater genius than his father. Luckily, Shelbourne had failed more than once at kidnapping the boy for his purposes.

Alastair was already conducting his own investigations into Shelbourne's activities when the lord abducted Lady Katherine in an attempt to coerce her brother's cooperation. Alastair had fortunately been able to assist Hale in recovering his cousin and dealt with the authorities' inquiries after Shelbourne killed himself rather than face the consequences of his actions and risk exposure of his comrades.

Based on what Alastair had come to understand from his father's writings about their strict rules of secrecy, he didn't believe Lord Shelbourne's activities or his involvement with the Blackwells had been known to the other members of their little sect. Hale, however, had not easily accepted that assurance. That man was a brutish sort in physicality and in temperament. And he took his responsibility to the Blackwells' safety very seriously.

Alastair couldn't fault him for it. In fact, he was grateful, since it was his sire who'd gotten their father mixed up with Shelbourne in the first place. Knowing his cousins were being well protected and by such a capable adversary was a significant relief.

When he'd gotten the note from Lady Katherine a few days ago politely suggesting they get together soon, he suspected the focus of the conversation would likely turn to their shared enemies. After his cousin was saved from Shelbourne's clutches, Alastair had tried to explain only what was necessary for them to understand the full extent of the danger inherent in pursuing the matter further.

Brute force—though impressive—wouldn't be effective against men with the kind of power and dominion possessed by the brotherhood. Alastair had done his best to convince them to let him handle the issue his way. Alone.

He suspected he hadn't been as successful as he'd hoped.

"Blast it," he muttered as the razor nicked his skin in his inattention. With his focus directed elsewhere, he quickly dapped the bead of blood with a handkerchief before folding the cloth and setting it aside.

Hale would no doubt batter him for information Alastair couldn't and wouldn't share. He couldn't afford to have any part of his plan disrupted. To the remaining members of the brotherhood and the world of London at large, he needed to fulfill the role laid out for him by his sire when he'd taken a poor young maid into the bowels of his lair and brutally raped her.

His mother had never recovered from the pain and indignity of that night and after, when she'd been forced to marry her attacker and the months following as she'd swelled with a child she never wanted.

After dropping his razor into a bowl of water, Alastair picked up a steaming wet towel and held it to his face. The familiar mixture of rage, loathing, and disgust stirred inside him.

There was nothing he could do to help his mother—there never had been—and she'd eventually been liberated from the pain and fury that had consumed her. And his wretched, evil sire had found an end as well, though not one of his choosing. The prior marquess's penchant for indiscretion caught up with him in Venice as his life became less valuable than his silence.

It didn't matter.

Alastair would do whatever it took to ensure justice finally befall those who so rightfully deserved it.

Lost in the turmoil of his thoughts, it took him a bit to register the sound of knocking at his door. The impatient nature of the sound suggested it had been going on for some time.

A glance at the clock told him he had barely half an hour before his guests arrived. There was no time for interruptions. Striding swiftly across the room, he tossed the cooling towel over his shoulder and opened the door.

Mrs. Evans. Likely the only person in the household who'd dare interrupt him while he was fighting to control his temper. Not that she or anyone else would know of his current state of mind. But the woman did have a peculiar gift for being present at the most inopportune moments.

"What is it?" he snapped when she didn't immediately speak.

Her focus had been trained intently on his face, but at his words, she blinked and her focus faltered for a split second as the direction of her gaze slipped below his chin before flying back to his face.

"I apologize for the interruption, my lord, but I need to confirm if you'd like to greet your guests in the parlor or the formal drawing room?"

Her tone was as firm and steady as ever, but Alastair sensed something uncertain in the woman.

When her level gaze flickered briefly downward once again, he realized with a rush of heat that it was his bared torso which seemed to be causing the woman's uncharacteristic disconcertion. She was trying very hard not to ogle him as he stood there in his breeches and nothing else.

In an entirely inappropriate turn of thought, he suddenly wondered if the "Mrs." in her name was an indication of true marital status or simply the respectful address afforded her as housekeeper. The idea that she might have a husband somewhere made him feel distinctly uncomfortable. And irritated.

"The parlor is fine, Mrs. Evans."

"I'll ensure the room is prepared."

"I know you will."

When she didn't immediately curtsy and walk away, he lowered his chin. "Is there anything else?"

Another blink. Then a soft tint of pink colored her cheeks before she gave a brief curtsy. "Not at all. Cook has everything in readiness and hopes you'll be pleased with her efforts."

"I've no doubt I will be."

She curtsied again, then turned and strode swiftly down the hall.

Alastair remained in the doorway, watching her. Something in the angle of her head and the efficiency of her movements captured his attention, though he couldn't pinpoint why. Before she stepped around the corner and out of sight, she cast a glance over her shoulder. Their eyes met for just an instant, but in that fleeting moment, it felt as though something sharp and unspoken passed between them.

He couldn't define it or discern what it meant, but it caused a sudden tightening in his chest and a rush of heat to his loins. With a deepening frown, he stepped back into his room and shut the door.

He finished dressing in a distracted rush, yet somehow his mirror showed a presentable figure with a neatly tied cravat when he glanced at his reflection on the way out. He had barely ten minutes before his guests were expected, and he had a feeling Lady Katherine would ensure a prompt arrival. Though young, a bit eccentric, and somewhat unsophisticated, his cousin had a certain innate authority Alastair couldn't help but admire.

The parlor was located at the front of the house overlooking the street and was done up in a color scheme of dark blue and evergreen. If not for the overblown style of Baroque furniture and excessive decoration the prior marquess had preferred, the atmosphere of the room might have been considered cozy. The fire had been stoked to a comfortable warmth, and crystal decanters containing a variety of spirits, from sherry to brandy to the best Scottish whisky, were neatly arranged on a sideboard.

It was not long before he heard the unmistakable sound of a carriage pulling up in front of the house. Tension stiffened his body. Taking long, heavy breaths in and out, he slowly managed to calm the rise of discomfort.

He was not a man accustomed to socializing. His childhood hadn't included anything of the sort, and after he'd become his own man, he'd kept such things to a minimum. In his many and varied travels, he'd socialized only when necessary and rarely in an intimate setting. There were simply too few people in the world whose company he truly enjoyed.

He'd just crossed the room to stand before the fire when Gideon appeared in the doorway.

"Lady Blackwell and Mr. Hale, my lord."

The butler's somber tone faded away as Hale's great hulking form crossed the threshold. Tall, broad, and packed with muscle, the man kept his long flaxen hair secured in a queue that accented his square features and intimidating scowl. In stark contrast was the smaller, much more feminine form of Alastair's cousin. Her slim hand rested comfortably on the former fighter's thick arm, though her dark auburn

coiffure barely reached her escort's shoulder. Despite her modest stature, there was undeniable strength in the young woman. Her life had not been one of pampering and overindulgence despite having been the daughter of a duke, and it showed.

Alastair gave a proper bow. "Welcome, Lady Katherine."

"Thank you for the invitation, cousin." Lady Katherine stepped forward. There was an earnest quality to her tone and a small but genuine smile on her lips. "It's lovely to see you again."

Alastair smiled tightly in return. "Always a pleasure, my lady."

Her dark brown eyes warmed. "Katherine, please." Then she turned to look up at her escort. "You remember Mr. Hale, of course."

"Of course. Welcome, Mr. Hale," he said simply with a nod to the brute beside her.

"Hm."

The short grunt was all the man offered in response.

"Please have a seat," he said stiffly, gesturing toward the furniture arrangement set up before the fire. "Would either of you like a drink while we wait to be called in for dinner?"

"A claret would be lovely," his cousin replied.

Alastair nodded then glanced to Hale with a lifted brow.

"Nothing for me."

Hale's refusal didn't surprise him. The man had avoided spirits the night Alastair attended dinner at his cousin's home, as well.

Lady Katherine took a seat on one of the settees, and Hale claimed the spot beside her. His feet were braced wide, and his hands were splayed on his thighs as he watched Alastair with a sharp eye.

Alastair claimed one of the chairs with his back to the fire and rested his snifter of brandy on his knee. Looking to his cousin, he lifted a brow. "I trust His Grace is doing well?"

She smiled. "He is. Frederick is exceptionally resilient."

Alastair had surmised that the young Duke of Northmoor was significantly more than that. If the fact that Shelbourne had needed the boy's cooperation in finishing the scientific work his father had refused to complete hadn't suggested the boy's intellectual superiority, his meeting with the boy after Lady Katherine's ordeal had proven to him that the duke was in possession of exceptional intelligence and a level of insight and maturity beyond his twelve years.

"That's good to hear." His gaze flickered to Hale's dark countenance before returning to Lady Katherine. "I presume you and your brother have not received any further threats since Shelbourne's death?"

"We have not. It seems you may have been correct in believing his actions toward my family were unknown to others." She tossed a grateful smile to Hale. "Besides, with my father's scientific journals

retrieved and destroyed, there is no further possibility of anyone replicating his work.”

Alastair nodded but made a point of saying, “Again, I hope you’d let me know if anything changes regarding such things.”

“Of course,” she replied readily before leaning forward. “But I must admit, while my concerns regarding my brother’s safety have mostly been assuaged, I now find myself worrying about yours, cousin.”

Alastair stiffened in order to resist the urge to fidget under her steady, earnest gaze. He’d never been the object of anyone’s concern. He’d experienced distrust, disgust, fear, and a host of other similar projections from his mother. And the few servants they’d been afforded certainly hadn’t had any incentive to worry over a boy who was regarded so harshly by his own mother while being utterly neglected by his father.

“I assure you, I’m at no significant risk, my lady,” he assured, but he could tell by the sideways glance she shared with the man beside her that she wouldn’t be accepting his dismissal so easily.

As though taking a silent cue from Lady Katherine, Hale shifted his heavily muscled form to rest his elbows on his knees.

“Listen, Warfield, we know you’re going after the others in Shelbourne’s little club, and we know it won’t be an easy fight. We’re offering to help, mate.”

Alastair shook his head. “I appreciate the offer,” he replied stiffly, “but I’ve no intention of putting my cousins in any further peril.”

“Neither do I,” Hale retorted roughly. “But I haven’t the same concern for myself.”

The scowl on the other man’s brow was heavy and dark. Alastair recalled how tormented Hale had been the night Lord Shelbourne had spirited Lady Katherine away to his secret property at the edge of town. He’d fought like a man who’d lost his very heart and soul.

And it was clear he wouldn’t stop fighting until there wasn’t a single threat remaining.

“From what you’ve told us, this is too big for one man to fight, Warfield,” Hale muttered roughly.

Ignoring Hale to sip from his brandy, Alastair glanced to his cousin.

Lady Katherine’s dark eyes met his with a calm, assured intelligence. Alastair got the feeling she understood something about him he hadn’t yet decided to share. When she spoke, her voice was quiet but firm. “You are not alone in this, cousin.”

Yes, he was.

He’d always been alone. It was the only thing he knew.

“I know people with skills that could be very valuable to your

endeavors,” Hale added cryptically.

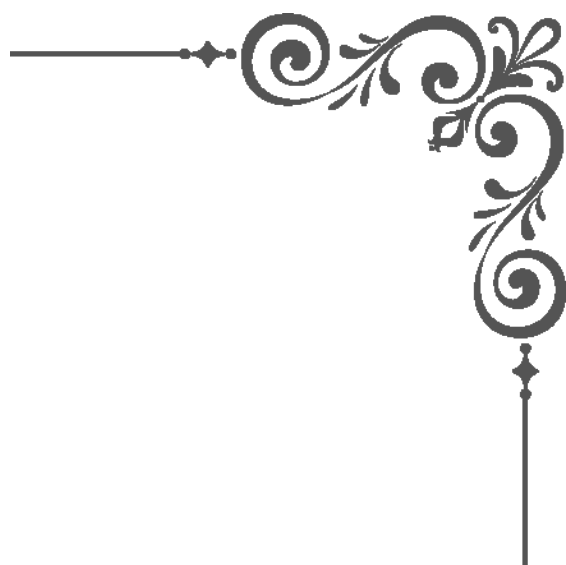
Alastair could only imagine the types of skills anyone of Hale’s acquaintance might possess. He was about to argue that brute force would only be a detriment to his purpose when he recalled how Hale had managed to get Lady Katherine’s father’s journals retrieved from Shelbourne’s house the very night she was abducted and rescued.

Perhaps there was some merit to Hale’s offer.

Gideon stepped into the doorway at that moment to announce dinner. Before rising to his feet, Alastair slid his gaze back to Hale.

“I’ll think on it.”

The other man gave a low grunt Alastair didn’t bother to interpret.



Chapter Seven

On the other side of the servants' entrance to the dining room, Lark directed the maids as they brought up the first course from the kitchens. The serving trays were then passed off to the footmen, who carried the food to the dining table and the marquess's guests. Once everything needed to start the meal was served and the female servants returned to the kitchen to finish prepping the next course, Lark cracked open the door to assess the presentation.

The footmen stood off to the side, silently watching for empty glasses that needed filling, dropped forks that required replacement, or any other prompt for intervention.

The tone at the dinner table was subdued. Conversation flowed at a low hum, but there was an underlying tension in the room. If she had to guess, she'd say the marquess and his guests were not well known to each other.

Curious, Lark stole a look at the lady seated to Warfield's right. She was young—likely younger than Lark herself—and pretty in her gown of robin's-egg blue with her dark auburn hair. There was a natural aristocracy in her demeanor and a kind intelligence in her gaze. Of the three of them, she appeared the most relaxed.

To the lady's side sat a large, muscled man with fair hair tied back at his nape and a deep gravelly voice. Something about him seemed oddly familiar. When he turned his head to whisper something to the auburn-haired lady that made her smile secretively, Lark got a good look at his profile and nearly gasped her shock out loud.

She'd seen him before, only once, but the experience had been indelibly burned into her memory. The broad-shouldered guest was none other than Mason Hale, also known as the Undefeated. A celebrated bare-knuckle boxer who used to take on any and all challengers in the East End. Lark had witnessed his final bout before he'd retired a number of years ago, and she recalled every moment of that fight.

What on earth had brought Mason Hale to the Marquess of Warfield's dining room?

"A shocking sight, isn't it, Mrs. Evans?"

Gideon spoke from over her shoulder. It was a testament to her shock, indeed, that he'd managed to step up behind her without her noticing.

“What is?” she muttered, glancing at the butler.

He gave a stoic nod toward the dining room. “The Undefeated seated not twenty meters away, dining with the marquess.”

Lark heard the mixture of censure and awe in the man’s voice. The corner of her mouth curled as she noted slyly, “You were an admirer.”

Gideon scoffed. “Wasn’t everyone? He’s a right beast in the ring. I was lucky enough to catch almost every one of his bouts.”

“I only saw his last.”

“Truly?” The butler’s brows shot upward. “At the White Hare in Covent Garden?”

Lark smiled and gave a nod as she gazed back into the dining room. “Is he a friend to the marquess?”

“Soon to be family, I understand.”

“You’re joking,” she gasped in earnest surprise.

“Not at all. That is Lady Katherine Blackwell, sister to the Duke of Northmoor and cousin to the marquess. I understand Lady Katherine and Mr. Hale are engaged to be married.”

Shock arced through her. “That can’t be possible. The sister of a duke cannot marry a commoner, let alone a bruiser of the East End.”

The butler harrumphed. “Seems to me the sister of a duke can do whatever she wants.” Lowering his voice, he added, “And I wouldn’t like to be the man to tell the Undefeated he can’t marry who he chooses.”

Lark studied the couple more closely. Now that she knew their association, it was easy to see they were enamored with each other. Though the signs were much more subtle in the lady, the heat and possession in the former fighter’s gaze were almost embarrassing to witness.

She glanced to the marquess, wondering what he thought of his cousin’s match.

Warfield sat straight and stiff at the head of the table. His gaze was as cool as ever, his expression unsmiling. When he glanced to Mr. Hale, she thought she saw something close to irritation in his gaze. But when he shifted his attention to Lady Katherine in order to reply to something she said, Lark noted a slightly softer affect in the marquess’s manner.

She’d guess he had some affection for the lady. Or, at the very least, a favorable regard.

Fascinating.

Any further consideration of the guests was delayed as the kitchen maids arrived with the next course. A flurry of activity followed as the footmen cleared away the empty dishes and replaced them with the next steaming dish. The rest of the meal flowed effortlessly as Lark moved between overseeing the dining room and checking on Mrs.

Reynard to ensure she had all she needed. A few hours later, the last dessert dishes were cleared from the table, and the marquess and his guests returned to the parlor.

Still being short-staffed, Lark assisted the maids in cleaning up the dining room. She'd be meeting with Gideon's granddaughters the next day and hoped they were as well trained and motivated as the butler had assured. She'd just started gathering the table linens when she heard the guests in the front hall, preparing for their departure.

A few moments after the front hall quieted again, Lark sensed someone entering the room behind her.

Turning around, she stiffened at the sight of Warfield's dark and handsome form.

His gaze was coolly direct, making her insides quiver involuntarily before she managed to still her unease. She returned his stare calmly. "My lord? Is there a problem?"

It took a moment before he answered. "No, Mrs. Evans." He took a few steps into the room. Filling the space with his presence. "In fact, dinner was wonderfully prepared and expertly served."

"Thank you, my lord. Cook will be delighted to hear it." Lark tilted her chin. "Perhaps you'd like to tell her yourself?"

It was an impertinent suggestion, but Mrs. Reynard had worked exceptionally hard to make a good impression with the evening's unexpected dinner party, and the woman deserved proper acknowledgment.

The lord's eyes flashed and his brows lowered, and Lark braced herself for a harsh set-down. He gave a short nod instead and muttered, "I will. Thank you, Mrs. Evans."

She allowed her surprise to show, but then the man abruptly turned and left the room in long strides, presumably to head to the kitchens.

Lark waited to a count of twenty before taking the table linens below stairs to the laundry. She really didn't wish to encounter the marquess again this evening. The dinner party seemed to have put him more on edge than usual.

Though the role of housekeeper was one of management and supervision, every good housekeeper knew how to complete the tasks of her subordinates. And when a house was as short-staffed as this one, every hand was needed when the work overflowed. By the time all the work of the evening was done—all the dishes washed and dried and put away and every bit of leftover food carefully stored, the dining room refreshed, and the parlor neatened—Lark was ready for the couple hours' sleep she'd hopefully manage to claim before she'd be rising once again.

Thank goodness the marquess preferred to sleep late in the

mornings.

After checking the dining room one last time to ensure everything was set back to rights, she crossed the entry hall toward the back hallway and the welcome comfort of her waiting bed. Passing the lord's study, she paused when she noticed a light on within. Someone had left a lamp burning.

With a sigh, she altered direction and entered the quiet study. She made it halfway across the room before she realized too late that it wasn't unoccupied.

The marquess sat in his favorite chair before the fireplace. But instead of his usually straight posture, he lounged almost carelessly. Slouched into one corner of the chair, he had his legs stretched out before him and crossed at the ankles. His evening coat had been tossed aside, and his sleeves had been rolled up to his elbows. Lark noted the empty snifter of brandy nestled in the palm of one strong hand.

She should have backed out of the room as soon as she saw him there, staring up at the portrait above the mantel. But she paused instead and gazed up at the painting herself. It depicted a gentleman in elegant finery, standing beside a dark-colored desk piled with books, a candelabra, a scale, and a few other items. The subject had pale hair and an athletic figure. His expression was solemn though there was a disconcerting tilt of amusement to his mouth and his pale, narrow-eyed stare was directed outward. She knew from a previous perusal of the portrait that it was the marquess's father, the first Marquess of Warfield, staring back at her.

For some reason, the image always managed to send a shiver creeping down her spine.

"Do you find him handsome, Mrs. Evans?"

The marquess's dark words surprised her. She'd had no idea he knew she was there.

When she didn't answer, he continued, "My mother found him so, though she also claimed to have been bewitched by the devil. I suppose evil has its own appeal. Wickedness a certain allure."

His words were only very slightly slurred, suggesting that although he was affected by the alcohol he'd consumed, he wasn't completely foxed. It resulted in a manner and tone that were far more relaxed than usual. More intimate. Her body responded unexpectedly to the alteration in him.

Softening. Melting.

He made a gravelly sound in his throat that might have been a harsh laugh or a simple clearing of his throat. "Though I cannot imagine *you* ever falling victim to such a clichéd temptation."

Without even realizing she'd moved closer, Lark found herself

standing beside his chair. Having no further desire to look up at the portrait, she looked at the flesh-and-blood man beside her instead.

"I've had too close an acquaintance with the evils men are capable of, my lord, to find it attractive under even the most deceptive circumstances."

Warfield turned to look at her. His eyes sparked with an odd, unholy light, and his teeth were clenched so tightly she could see the muscle ticking in his jaw. If he was surprised by her candid reply, he did not reveal it.

"Do you see evil in me, Mrs. Evans?"

His voice was heavy and dark, the tone of it felt intimate, like a drift of black smoke through the night.

She couldn't answer.

And he didn't make her.

After a moment, he directed his attention back to the portrait. "My mother did. I'm not sure she was wrong."

His mother thought him evil?

The question shocked her and lingered in her mind as he took a weighted breath. "Do you suppose we're destined to become another version of our parents?"

"I've no idea. I never knew my parents."

He looked back at her with a raised brow. "An orphan?"

"A foundling. Left on a church doorstep in the first days of life."

Though his stare became rather intense and piercing, she did not avert her gaze. She felt no shame for her past. Certainly not the parts over which she had no control.

"You look surprised, my lord. It's not an uncommon tale."

"Yet I get the sense there is nothing common about you at all, Mrs. Evans." Then he made another rough sound as he gestured to the chair across from him. "Sit and tell me your story."

The impropriety of his command was undeniable, though it seemed he was just drunk enough not to notice. Or not to care. Once again, she acknowledged that she should leave. And once again, she did not.

Stepping forward, she took a seat as he gazed at her with those light blue eyes. Staring into her. Seeing her.

"Have you any knowledge who your mother or father might have been?"

"None at all," she answered simply.

"Does that bother you?"

"Not particularly."

He tilted his head. "What became of you after you were found?"

She wasn't sure why he was so curious, and though she never would've been so revealing to any other employer, in this moment,

they didn't feel like servant and master. For some reason, he wished to converse a while. And it felt rather natural to indulge him.

"I lived at an orphanage for a time. After some years, I left."

His eyebrow arched. "You ran away?"

"I was a willful child, and the headmaster was a strict and forceful man. The situation became...unbearable."

His brow furrowed. "How old were you?"

Slightly unnerved by his intense attention, she lowered her gaze to smooth a wrinkle from her skirt with the pad of her thumb. "Rather young, I'd say. I recall having a seventh birthday at the orphanage, but none after."

"Seven years old and alone in the city?" There was clear incredulity in his voice. "You weren't frightened?"

"I don't think so. I felt more...liberated, I suppose. Eventually, I was taken in by some older children. They shared their food and gave me a place to stay."

"A street gang?"

"To me, they were family."

"How long were you with them?"

"Several years. Until it was time to do something else." She intentionally left out the fact that another little orphan girl a number of years younger than her was the inspiration to get off the streets.

The marquess tilted his head as his gaze narrowed thoughtfully. "Why do I get the feeling there's a helluva lot more to your story than you're letting on?"

Lark allowed the corner of her mouth to lift. "Because there is."

In an effort to change the subject, she tipped her head toward the offensive portrait. "You know you could have it removed?"

There was a long silence as he looked back to the painting. Tension returned to darken his features. "I will. But not yet."

It was clear he hated the man who'd sired him, but as she watched him staring up at the man's image, she suspected his hatred acted like a fuel. Toward what purpose, she couldn't imagine.

As the silence lengthened, Lark slowly rose to her feet. The movement drew the lord's attention back to her. Looking into his eyes, she saw something in their depths that reached straight for the center of her soul. It was poignant and heavy and dark.

"Mrs. Evans."

His voice moved through her like white lightning through the night.

"Yes, my lord?"

"Is that your true surname?" he asked.

She met his gaze. "It's the name I chose for myself when I needed one."

“Does that mean there is no Mr. Evans?”

Again, not a proper thing for him to be asking. Yet she answered anyway. “There is not.”

There was a brief flicker of acknowledgment in his eyes followed by a long pause as they stared at each other. Then his brows lowered, shadowing his gaze. “And your given name?”

She hesitated only a moment. “Lark.”

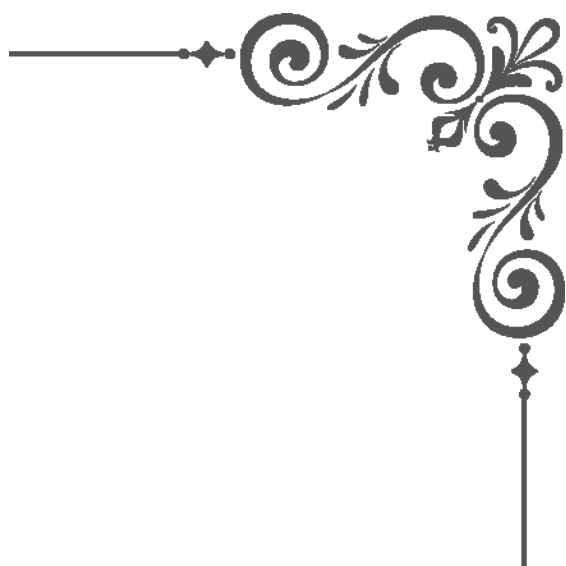
“Did you choose that as well?”

“No, it was given to me by the orphanage.”

When he said nothing more, just continued to stare at her in an unsettling way, she gave a quick curtsy and murmured, “I’ll leave you to your evening, my lord.”

As she walked away, a small part of her anticipated the marquess’s dark voice quietly calling her back. But the room remained silent.

The next morning, to Lark’s surprise, the marquess requested morning tea be brought to him in the morning room. To everyone’s shock *except* Lark, he also requested breakfast.



Chapter Eight

The clock in the front hall struck midnight as Lark crept soundlessly along the servants' hall to the garden door. She'd dressed in her darkest wool dress and wore a hooded cloak. Her white apron and lace cap had been left behind, and tucked in her pocket was the knife she'd kept near since she'd been a child...when she'd been a different girl in another life.

A life prior to the day she'd approached the heavy front doors of Yeardley Asylum for Girls with Harriet cowering nervously behind her. From that day on, the dank alleys filled with starvation and desperation became a part of another past. But Lark never forgot the lessons she'd learned in the first fourteen years of her life. They were too deeply ingrained. Too fiercely woven into her basic makeup no matter how faithfully the asylum had worked to mold her into a young woman worthy of serving London's upper class.

The night sounds of Mayfair were very different from what she was accustomed to, and it always took her a few moments to acclimate to the relative quiet that drifted through the darkness. The neighborhoods she once roamed as a child would have been filled with a variety of noises and activity at this time of night. The relative quiet surrounding her now was briefly unnerving, though it was comforting to know she'd hear someone approaching from a long way off.

The gate in the rear corner of Warfield's garden opened and closed silently, as expected since she'd made sure to have the hinges well oiled. After stepping into the mews, she paused and listened as she contemplated which direction she'd take.

Her position as Warfield's housekeeper had kept her quite busy over the last couple weeks, and she hadn't been able to slip away as much as she'd hoped. But since keeping her job was vital to her purpose, there hadn't been much she could do about it. So far, she'd managed to sneak away like this only two previous times. Those prior sojourns had been focused on orienting herself, learning the deepest shadows while becoming familiar with the local lanes and alleys, as well as which streets tended to have more traffic and would need to be avoided.

Her talk with Gideon the other day had been productive in discovering who occupied some of the houses in the surrounding

neighborhood—in particular, those that faced Curzon Street.

She now knew that just across the garden was a grand old mansion belonging to the Earl of Altham. His significantly younger countess and their five children most often stayed at their country estate, while the earl remained in town since he was active in the House of Lords. To one side of Altham was the elderly Mr. and Mrs. Elton, who'd lived in their home for more than forty years. And past them stood the bachelor residence of Lord Lowndes. To the other side of Altham was the very prestigious household of the Lord and Lady Hazelton, another older couple renowned for their charity work.

Beyond their front doors and across Curzon stood four more stately homes belonging to the Viscount Marlowe, a physician Dr. Kirby, Lord and Lady Dryden with their three daughters—two out in society with a third soon to leave the schoolroom—and a house previously belonging to a Lord Shelbourne, which had stood empty since the aged gentleman's untimely death some weeks ago.

Harriet had been working as personal maid to the three Dryden girls when she'd sent her note and subsequently disappeared.

Moving on swift and soundless feet, Lark fled through the mews to the lane that would take her around to Curzon Street. Once free of the deeper shadows, she continued on more carefully. Though it was late at night in an elite residential area, there was still some potential to encounter people returning home after a late party or an evening at a gentlemen's club. She had no desire to be noticed and possibly questioned on her purpose in being out and about at such an hour herself.

Turning onto Curzon Street, she experienced a heightened awareness. Her nape tingled, her ears twitched, and her nerves buzzed. The heightening of her senses was something she'd experienced frequently as a child on the streets—whenever she'd approached a particularly challenging mark.

Though she'd started as a pickpocket—typical for the youngest members of street gangs—her gift for tuning out distractions and focusing in on details that could warn of impending peril soon had her promoted to one of the teams that cased out empty houses. She quickly adapted to the skills and instincts needed for housebreaking and became a bit renowned for her success in bringing in the best loot.

The Dryden family's home was a stately brick structure with white columns and black shutters. Despite the late hour, many of the main- and first-floor windows were well lit, and a few carriages were lined up out front. It appeared someone was entertaining.

She'd been advised the family would be attending the opera that evening, but apparently, either their plans had changed abruptly or

they hadn't included everyone in the household.

Taking up a position under the heavy, draping fall of a willow tree, she glanced to the small windows of the uppermost level. One of those had belonged to Harriet. She'd often written to Lark about the lovely view of the street she'd shared with two other maids. Lark knew from some careful inquiries that the only change to the household staff in the last months had been Harriet's departure. Someone in that house had to know what had happened to her friend and where she'd gone.

Tonight, she prayed she'd get some answers.

It had taken significant persuasion and multiple correspondence with an old friend who had an acquaintance whose cousin was one of the maids who'd worked with Harriet, but she'd finally managed to arrange for a quick meeting with the maid who'd shared Harriet's duties as personal attendant to the young ladies of the house. With the Drydens expected to be out for the evening, it had seemed a perfect opportunity to interview the young woman. Lark hoped the unanticipated party wouldn't deter the maid from speaking with her.

She carefully made her way around to the rear of the house. Though lamps lit the street, there were plenty of dark paths winding between garden walls and carriage houses. Along the way, she noted any blind corners or hiding spots she could take advantage of if it became necessary.

The gardens of Dryden House were meticulously maintained with perfect rows of flowers and symmetric placement of trees and shrubs lining the paths. The not altogether unpleasant scent of dying flowers and greenery heading toward winter dormancy filled the air.

Crouching in the corner of a tall hedgerow, Lark tugged her hood farther over her face as she studied the back of the house, noting the two entrances and the ground-level windows. Though the maid was supposed to meet her outside, Lark did not discount the possibility that someday she might have a need to get inside herself. She'd have to get closer to determine the most accessible entry point, but from what she could see, it shouldn't be terribly difficult.

Unfortunately, she detected no sign of the maid just yet. She hoped the girl would be able to get away.

A burst of merriment sounded from the house, and she settled more fully into the shadows at the rear of the garden. Just a few moments later, she heard movement. Furtive and uncertain. Then she saw a small, pale face peeking around the corner of the house.

"Hello?"

The low, whispered word urged Lark from her hiding spot. "I'm here," she replied as she swiftly made her way along the wall toward the maid, who was glancing about with wide eyes as she twisted her fingers in her apron.

“You’re the one I’m supposed to meet?”

Lark wondered who else the maid thought she might be but replied gently, “Thank you for agreeing to speak with me. I only need a few moments.”

“This way.” The girl motioned. “Please. I can’t risk being seen.”

Lark followed the girl to an inset doorway that allowed them to step out of full view from any of the windows. The maid, who looked to be near in age to Harriet’s twenty-three, met Lark’s gaze with a wary expression.

“You wanna know ’bout Harriet, yeah?”

“Anything you can tell me would be appreciated.”

The girl shook her head vigorously. “I don’t know much.” She glanced around before leaning forward. “But I fear something bad may’ve happened.”

Lark’s chest squeezed tight. “Why?”

“The last time I saw her was the night of a special party.”

“Special how?”

“Don’t know exactly, only that on certain nights when Lady Dryden and the three misses are otherwise occupied, the master’ll sometimes have a small group of gentlemen over for *special* entertainment. Since Harriet and I are assigned to care for the young ladies, we’d have no cause to assist in the event ourselves.” The maid’s voice lowered. “Except...just as we were readying ourselves for bed, Harriet was called downstairs. She didn’t come back.”

The strain of fear in the girl’s voice shot like ice through Lark’s veins.

“She didn’t come back? As in, she didn’t return to her room that night?”

“Nor the next day. Not ever.”

“What about her things? Her personal effects?”

“Taken away by Mrs. Greer, the housekeeper, with nary a word.”

Lark struggled to make sense of what the maid said.

“Is there anything else—anything at all—you can recall from that night or the next morning? Have you any idea who the gentlemen were that attended the party?”

“Sorry, but that’s all I know. The lord’s special parties are always kept very secret. For the most part, we’re told to keep to our rooms during such events.”

Lark nodded and offered a grateful smile. “Thank you. I know this was a risk for you, but I appreciate it more than you can know.”

A soft knock could just barely be heard on the other side of the door. The girl tensed. “I’ve gotta get back inside, but I hope she’s...I hope she’s all right.”

“Wait.” As the girl turned away, Lark stopped her with a hand to

her shoulder. "I want you to know that if you ever need a new position—if you feel unsafe here—I will do what I can to help you."

"I'm...I..." There was another knock. "I've got to go."

As the maid slipped through the door, Lark felt a moment of crushing fear. The information she'd gotten from the frightened girl was the worst she could have expected.

Harriet had disappeared from her place of employment during a private party, leaving behind all her things. The circumstances were extremely suspect and suggested something tragic had befallen her dear friend. And yet...somehow, Harriet had managed to get a note to Lark asking her not to look for her and begging her forgiveness. As though she'd made some sort of choice in her disappearance. At the very least, it allowed Lark to continue believing her friend was alive despite the terrified maid's accounting.

But it inspired far more questions than it answered. What had happened that night? Where had Harriet gone? Had she been forced to flee out of self-preservation, or had she been coerced away somehow?

As more sounds of revelry from inside spilled into the night, she swiftly made her way through the garden to the back gate, then slipped into the mews. Though her thoughts were in chaos, she kept her senses attuned to detect the possibility of anyone else moving through the night nearby. It was an old habit she'd likely never shake.

And it was a good thing the skill remained honed when she detected the faint scuff of a boot on stone and the distant rustle of fabric, quickly prompting her to seek out the deepest shadows lining the narrow lane. Searching the darkness, it took her a moment to discern the solitary dark figure keeping close to the shadows himself as he crossed the street not far in front of her.

There was something disturbingly familiar in the way he moved—silently, deliberately. Like the predatory panther slinking through a night jungle rather than a gentleman strolling through Mayfair.

Her breath caught as awareness spiked in her blood. A tingle of apprehension slid down the hollow of her spine.

Warfield.

She knew the marquess had gone out this evening, but she had no idea he'd remained in the neighborhood. It probably wouldn't have roused her suspicion to see him strolling about late at night if not for the fact that he seemed intent upon staying as unseen as she did.

Instinct urged her to follow him.

Keeping close enough not to lose sight of him while ensuring he wouldn't detect her presence, she trailed him to the other end of Curzon Street and a house that, if Gideon's information was correct, had been empty since its owner's passing.

When the marquess entered the abandoned mansion's garden and

continued boldly to the back entrance of the house, Lark crouched in the shadows and watched.

What business could the marquess have at this lord's empty home? In the middle of the night under cover of a moonless sky?

The marquess made his way silently along a path to the house. Stopping at a back door that appeared to be a kitchen entrance, he paused as a gust of wind rustled the dried leaves of a tree close to Lark's hiding spot. Stiffening, the marquess turned to glance back over his shoulder. The faint reach of starlight touched his angled features as his gaze swept past her position.

Lark curled her hands into fists and lowered her chin. He couldn't see her. She knew he couldn't. Yet, for a second, she felt certain he knew she was there.

Peeking up from under the edge of her hood, Lark observed the marquess in a moment of indecision. Then he turned away, and after a moment, the door in front of him opened and he slipped inside the unlit house.

Lark waited for long, uncounted minutes. Keeping her breath slow and even, her body unmoving. Once she was assured Warfield wasn't returning, she quietly crept away in the opposite direction.

She hadn't the slightest idea what the marquess could be doing sneaking into an empty home belonging to a gentleman who'd died weeks before. It was none of her business. She should never have followed him in the first place.

She told herself these things, but she couldn't let the matter go. There was really no good reason for her employer to be breaking into the house of a neighboring lord. It was nearly impossible to imagine Warfield as a thief, but she struggled to come up with another explanation.

Unfortunately, Curzon Street was quickly filling with activity as guests began leaving Dryden House. To remain unseen, Lark was forced to take a more roundabout way. Thoughts of Warfield faded as she focused on getting home unseen.

At least the Warfield mansion was still and silent when she passed through the servants' entrance and made her way along narrow hallways to her room. After lighting a candle, she quickly exchanged her cloak and dark dress for a cotton nightgown and took down her hair to re-braid it into a single plait down her back. Her hands shook at the task as she considered what she'd learned from the young maid.

What the hell had happened to Harriet?

Degradation, harassment, and assault were common risks faced by female servants in households that boasted gentlemen of ignoble repute. After being accosted by a lord's son at one of her very first positions, it was the reason Lark always kept her knife handy.

Had Harriet been defiled during Lord Dryden's party?

The thought filled Lark with fury. Harriet was and always had been such an optimistic girl. Despite her rough start in the rookery, she'd always somehow managed to find the joy and wonder in all she experienced. Even though Lark had tried to prepare her for the evils of the world, Harriet staunchly believed in the innate goodness of people.

Lark closed her eyes and swallowed past the hard lump in her throat.

Dear God, please let her be all right.

A knock at her door startled her from her thoughts. Alarm washed through her as she glanced to the clock.

It was well past two o'clock in the morning. Far too late for any reasonable visitor.

Had someone seen her sneaking back into the house? Had she been spied in Dryden's garden and followed? Had the marquess seen her after all?

No. She'd taken every precaution.

Sweeping up an old shawl from the back of her chair, she wrapped it about her shoulders. Then she placed an unpleasant scowl on her face as she opened her door a bare crack, doing her best to appear as though she'd just been awoken from a heavy sleep.

The marquess—dressed in evening wear and smelling of crisp autumn nights—filled the dim and narrow hallway with his intense presence as he leaned one shoulder almost casually against the frame of her door.

After a sharp flare of panic, she reassured herself there was no way he could know of her activities tonight. Shifting her expression into one of cautious concern, she asked, "My lord? Is there something you need?"

There was a long, silent pause as he slowly assessed her appearance. From her loosely braided hair to the shawl and nightgown, down to her bare toes.

Pale blue eyes sparked as he brought his gaze back to hers. "I happened to see a light still on in your room when I returned home and thought I'd check to be sure there wasn't any sort of problem."

"No problem at all, my lord."

"Are you usually up at such an hour?"

Lark thought quickly. "No, actually, I wasn't up at all." She glanced down as though in embarrassment before continuing. "The truth is I've a rather unnatural fear of the dark. Some nights I feel more comfortable if I leave a candle burning. Don't worry, my lord, I purchase the candles myself from my earnings."

The marquess glanced past her into the room. His focus slid

quickly from the low glow of the dying fire in the grate to the lit candle beside her bed. Something in his gaze had her glancing back over her shoulder. It was impossible to miss how her bedcovers were all perfectly smooth and undisturbed, indicating to anyone who might glance at them that the bed hadn't been slept in at all.

Searching her mind for a possible explanation, she turned back to the marquess to see a grimace of pain marring his handsome features. She also finally noticed how he kept one arm wrapped secure across his middle, his hand pressed to his side beneath the edge of his coat. A shiver coursed through her. Something wasn't right.

Looking to his face again, she noted the strain around his mouth. "My lord?"

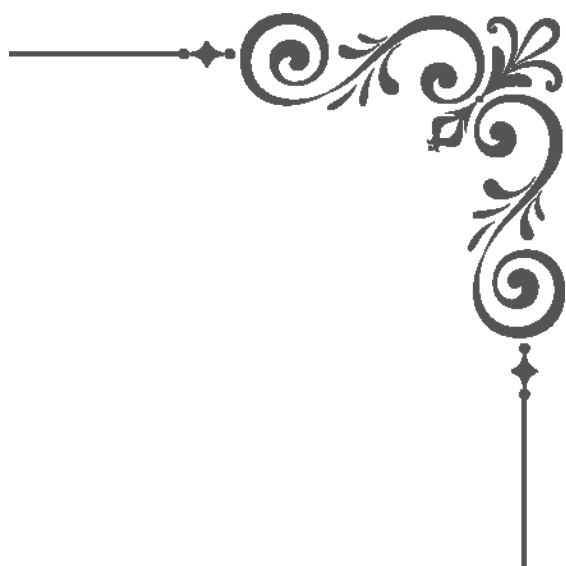
"Since you *are* awake, Mrs. Evans, might I request your assistance?"

"You're injured."

"Afraid so."

Though questions swirled through her head, she ignored them to focus on the more immediate concern. "How bad?"

A pause as his pale eyes met hers. "Bad enough."



Chapter Nine

Lark stepped aside to allow him entrance. “Come in, then.”

He pushed away from the doorframe and half strode, half stumbled into her bedroom.

“Sit down,” she insisted. *Before you fall down.*

As he lowered himself heavily into one of the chairs before her low-burning hearth, Lark quickly stoked the dying coals into full flame before adding water to the teakettle and setting it to warm. She had no idea yet what his injury might be, but hot water came in handy for a variety of things.

After relighting a few candles, she brought a couple with her to set on the table between the armchairs.

The marquess had tipped his head back and closed his eyes. His hand had fallen away from his side to rest in his lap. His fingers and palm were covered in blood, and the dark material of his waistcoat was made even darker with more. He must have lost a lot of blood to be so weakened.

Fear and concern tickled the back of her skull, but neither emotion would be of much help to the marquess. He needed firm focus and decisive action.

She gave a sharp clap of her hands. “Perk up, my lord. You’ll need to stay awake for this.”

He opened his eyes with a fierce scowl. The crystalline blue peered at her through narrow slits. “I haven’t lost consciousness yet, Mrs. Evans.”

Though the sharpness of his tone lifted the fine hairs on her nape, she refused to let his iciness deter her. “Then you can assist me by removing your clothing. I’ll need to see what’s what.”

Turning away, she fetched a few more necessary items. A washbowl filled with some of the warming water from the kettle, a clean cloth, and a needle and thread since she was fairly certain there’d be some stitching required. She might need to fetch some things from the kitchen to make a poultice, and she’d need some linen for bandages. But first, she needed to stop the bleeding and get the wound cleaned.

Returning to the marquess, she repositioned a small footstool at his side, where she could reach the items on the table and use the candlelight to greatest advantage.

He'd removed his outer garments as she'd instructed and had loosened his neckcloth. His white dress shirt had a long slash in it and was soaked in a large red stain that was garish in the flickering light.

Taking up the cloth, she submerged it in the water bowl. "Remove your shirt, my lord."

She noted his hesitation from the corner of her eye, but he did as she said. Slowly and with some effort.

After wringing out the cloth, she turned back to see him bared to the waist and leaning heavily on his elbow where he'd propped it on the armrest. His head was tipped back, and his eyes were closed while his chest rose and fell with deep, intentional breaths. The defined muscles of his chest and abdomen expanded and contracted with every inhale and exhale, and his lean but powerful torso was smeared with blood.

Angling her head, she focused on the wound. It was several centimeters long and was located just below his lowest rib. Dark red blood seeped slowly from the gash.

It had all the appearance of a slashing knife wound.

It did not look terribly deep, but if his lung or any other organ had been damaged, she might not be able to offer much help.

Putting the thought from her mind, she pressed the clean, wet cloth firmly over the wound. It didn't seem to be bleeding as heavily as she'd feared, which was a good sign. Holding pressure over the wound, she used her other hand to gently probe the area to see if there was tenderness in the nearby organs.

Watching the marquess's face carefully for any signs of pain or discomfort, she was concerned by the fact that he didn't react at all, not even to the heavy pressure she placed on the wound site. His eyes were tightly closed, but his breath remained steady and slow through slightly parted lips, and the pulse visible at the side of his throat was strong and even.

She reached her hand to his forehead to check for fever. He was warm but not hot to the touch. As she withdrew her hand, his eyes opened to stare intently into hers. At such close proximity, she was able to see the fine shards of silver scattered throughout the pale blue. Despite his obvious discomfort, his gaze was intensely direct.

"Still here, Mrs. Evans."

She cleared her throat then lifted the cloth to observe the wound. The bleeding had stopped, at least for the time being. "I'll need to clean the area and try to assess how deep the damage goes."

He glanced down, then sucked a swift breath through clenched teeth before tipping his head back and directing his gaze to the ceiling. "Do what you must," he muttered thickly, "just be quick about it."

“Would you like something to dull the pain?”

“No. The pain is tolerable and my head’s already spinning.”

She frowned. She didn’t believe he’d lost as much blood as she’d initially suspected. Yet his struggle to remain conscious appeared genuine.

First, she wiped the dried blood from his skin so she could verify whether he’d sustained any other injuries. He remained unmoving throughout, though the pass of the wet cloth gave rise to gooseflesh on his skin. When she was satisfied there was just the one wound, she probed about with her fingers a bit more, even used careful pressure to part the edges of the wound to determine its depth. None of her actions seemed to bother the marquess at all. He remained still and silent. His eyes closed or his gaze averted during the ordeal.

By the end of it all, she was fairly certain the wound was not as deep as it could have been. She suspected the lord’s tightly woven waistcoat might have managed to hinder the swipe of the attacker’s blade, or he simply hadn’t gotten close enough to cause significant damage.

“I’ll need to stitch you up.”

“Do it.”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t like something to dull the pain?”

His hard gaze met hers. “The pain is minimal. Just get it done.”

Lark sighed at his terse response but went about threading the needle before bringing one of her candles closer to shed more light.

“Hold still,” she murmured.

He gave a soft grunt of acknowledgment but didn’t even twitch at the poke of her needle. The marquess seemed to have a rather high tolerance for pain.

After completing the task and clipping off the thread, Lark rose to her feet. When Warfield shifted as if to rise as well, she placed her hand on his shoulder. Her fingers tensed at the feel of his warm, smooth skin beneath her palm. “Stay put. I’ve got to fetch some things to prepare a poultice to fight infection. Then I’ll bandage you up.”

He looked up at her with a fierce scowl for a moment, and she half expected him to tell her to go to the devil. But then he settled back in the chair again. “If you must.”

She stepped away and started gathering his discarded clothing.

“These will need to be soaked. Hopefully, the blood will come out.”

“Burn them.”

She paused with his red-stained shirt in her hand. “Excuse me?”

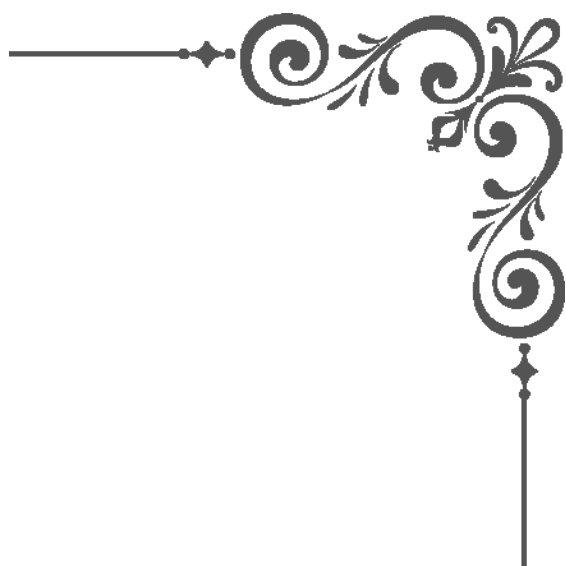
“Just get them out of my sight.” His gaze was strictly averted as he waved a hand toward the bowl of red-tinged water and the bloodied cloth. “All of it.”

There was more tension in his body now than there had been while

she'd cleaned and probed and stitched his wound. And she noted the way he drew deep breaths through tense, parted lips rather than through his nose.

Suddenly, his contradictory demeanor made sense. The man might have a high tolerance for pain, but she'd wager her life's savings his tolerance for blood was essentially nonexistent.

"Of course, my lord," she replied, resisting a twitch of humor.



Chapter Ten

Alastair tried to relax in the thick-cushioned armchair while doing his best not to look at the wound in his side. He knew it wasn't very bad. He'd had worse. But still, he struggled to keep the metallic scent of blood that lingered in the air from twisting his stomach.

It had always been that way. Since he'd been a small child and had accidentally sliced through his finger with a sharp rock. The sight, smell, feel, *acknowledgment* of blood made his head spin and his insides clench against a rise of nausea. He hated the weakness, but he'd learned to live with it. Somewhat.

Mostly, he just tried to avoid any opportunity to bloody himself or anyone else in his vicinity. It wasn't exactly a reasonable expectation considering his current activities, but one he did his best to adhere to nonetheless. Not that he wasn't willing to engage in a fight. He just preferred the methods he'd learned abroad, which focused on things like pressure points to incapacitate an opponent rather than weapons that tended to break the skin.

Tonight, however, had been unavoidable.

He'd gone to the late Lord Shelbourne's property, which had stood empty and essentially abandoned since the man poisoned himself rather than face the consequences for his failed attempt at forcing the Blackwells to do his bidding. Alastair had gone to search the mansion immediately after he and Hale had safely recovered Lady Katherine. But there had already been someone rummaging about the place, so he'd retreated. He'd realized later that it had been someone sent by Hale to recover the journals stolen from Lady Katherine's father.

Since then, Alastair had managed to explore the abandoned property extensively. Similar to his own inherited house, the Shelbourne mansion contained a few secret passages. Not similar, however, was the fact that it also contained a stubbornly locked room that he hadn't yet been able to access. Despite multiple searches of the house, he hadn't located a key to the complex iron lock.

Tonight, he'd gone back to make yet another attempt. Unfortunately, he hadn't been the only person slinking about in the abandoned mansion. He'd just gotten down to the cellar, where the locked door was located, when he'd literally bumped into a man dressed in heavy wool and a concealing cap tugged low over shaggy hair.

Alastair had already been stepping back when the other man lashed out. Alastair had leapt to the side, but the man's wide-swinging blade got him across the side. As he fell back against the wall, the intruder took off into the night.

A common burglar, perhaps? Or a lackey?

Though the wound was likely no more than a scratch, as soon as he'd felt the warm, wet stickiness soaking into his clothes, Alastair's head had immediately begun to spin, and he'd been forced to leave or risk losing consciousness right there in Shelbourne's house. By the time he'd gotten home, he'd almost succumbed to the dizziness more than once.

And then...Mrs. Evans.

He shouldn't have gone to her rooms. Shouldn't have allowed the intimacy of her ministrations. But the impropriety of accepting his housekeeper's assistance seemed less a risk than collapsing in his own blasted hallway. He'd never have been able to address the wound himself. And he didn't wish to wake one of the other maids, who all seemed to eye him with wary suspicion whenever they passed him in the halls after nightfall.

Now that the most significant evidence of bloodshed had been removed and the threat of losing consciousness had passed, another feeling started to stir inside him. It was the kind of discomfort that wouldn't be eased quite so readily.

Mrs. Evans might have a steady hand and refined focus in moments of crisis, as well as exceptional skill with a stitch, but he couldn't believe his appearance in the middle of the night, sporting a knife wound, wouldn't rouse the intelligent woman's curiosity.

The door opened quietly and the housekeeper reentered the room. She carried an earthenware jar in one hand and a small basket of linens in the other.

He was too distracted by his spilled blood to have noticed earlier, but as the woman crossed the cozy little room toward him now, it was impossible to miss the fact that he sat half-nude, while his housekeeper wore nothing but a voluminous nightgown. Glancing down, he noted her bare toes peeking from beneath the hem. The woman hadn't even bothered to throw on a robe before answering her door, and the shawl draped over her shoulders did little in terms of propriety.

She paused and tilted her head. "Feeling better?"

Was that a hint of amusement in her tone?

Surely not. But he wouldn't put it past her to have deduced his aversion to blood.

Scowling, he glanced to the jar in her hands. "I suppose you'll insist on slathering me with some noxious mixture?"

She lifted a fine-arched brow. "Unless you'd prefer to succumb to fever from whatever your attacker's blade may have introduced to your body. But perhaps you'd enjoy the opportunity to spend several days abed fighting a deadly infection."

He should have been surprised by the insolent sarcasm in her voice, but he suspected it was truer to her nature than the flat tone he typically heard from her.

"Despite my earlier...presentation, I am not as vulnerable as you seem to think."

"Infection can bring down anyone, my lord. Stubbornness doesn't provide an exemption."

He was sorely tempted to keep arguing with her for the simple satisfaction of it but realized it would only cause further delay. The less time he stayed in her private rooms, the better. "Fine."

Barely acknowledging his acquiescence, she simply lowered herself back to the footstool at his side. Setting the basket in her lap, she lifted the lid from the jar and dipped her fingers into the mixture. Though there was an earthiness to the scent of the poultice, it didn't smell nearly as bad as he'd feared. She seemed to intentionally avoid meeting his gaze as she focused on the wound and the immediate surrounding area.

The first touch of her fingers had him drawing a swift breath. Though her touch was gentle, the mixture was cool. Even so, Alastair suspected it was more than the temperature that had fine gooseflesh rising across his skin.

A voice in his head told him to avert his gaze as he'd done while she'd cleaned and stitched him. But he refused to listen. Instead, he studied the way the firelight burnished her light golden hair as it swept back from a center part to the long braid falling over her shoulder. The texture of it was smooth and straight, like cornsilk, and he wondered if it would slide across his skin as softly as her fingertips.

Until that moment, he hadn't allowed himself to think intently on the fact that she was touching his bare skin. But as soon as he did, a rush of sensations that had nothing at all to do with his injury spread through him. Tingling heat, a swift rise in his pulse. A deep, aching tug through his core. His entire body tensed in resistance as his hands gripped the armrests and his belly muscles tightened.

She immediately stopped what she was doing and lifted her gaze to his face. Curiosity and subtle concern glinted in her eyes for just a second before they widened with a sudden flash of alarm.

But she didn't look away and didn't move to put distance between them.

Time slowed.

Alastair watched in uneasy fascination as the stormy gray of her

eyes darkened and her lips parted. Her attention slid to his mouth in a quick flicker before she glanced down at where her hand hovered above his abdomen.

The room was suddenly too warm and quiet and dark as the air around them thickened with anticipation.

It was everything he'd been doing his best to avoid since this woman first strode into his study and turned her intent gaze in his direction.

Forcing an even tone to his voice, he tried to ground the moment in something less...dangerous.

"How'd you become so adept at nursing?"

She looked away, turning her attention to her supplies. "A good housekeeper possesses a wide variety of skills, my lord."

Her answer was vague, revealing absolutely nothing about how she'd acquired such a talent. But there was a certain poignancy in her tone that suggested the truth was significant and deeply personal.

"And this doesn't bother you? Mending a knife wound in the middle of the night?"

"Not particularly, no," she replied while keeping her head bent to her task. The flat nature of her reply suggested a hint of boredom at the topic.

Alastair lifted a brow. "Is it such a common occurrence in your experience?"

He thought he saw a small twitch at the corner of her mouth as she turned slightly away from him to put the lid back on the jar then withdrew a square of linen from the basket. "Not since I became a servant in noble households, though I have tended a couple dueling injuries in recent years." She paused and met his gaze. "I suspect you weren't engaged in such foolishness, my lord."

Too late, he realized he'd led the conversation down a path he should've been avoiding.

He cleared his throat and glanced to the fire. "I went for a walk and was accosted by a brigand."

She tilted her head and her brows lifted above a curious gaze. "A brigand? In Mayfair? How...shocking."

Her tone made it clear she wasn't shocked at all. She simply didn't believe him.

He considered trying to convince her, then decided holding his tongue was likely the better option. If she truly didn't care, then forcing the issue would do more harm than good.

But he couldn't keep from wondering what the woman had experienced in her life to create such a casual attitude to the evidence of violence. Then he recalled that she'd grown up running the streets of London. She'd likely experienced a great deal.

The acknowledgment triggered an odd sensation inside him. Like a complex knotting of some emotion he'd either forgotten the name of or had never really known before.

Refocusing on her task, she folded the linen into a small square then pressed it to his wound. "Hold this, please."

Alastair did as she instructed, reaching across his body to cover her fingers with his own for a brief moment before she slid her hand away. In that second of contact, however, he noted the warmth and softness of her fingers. When he heard the short hitch in her breath, he had to clench his back teeth to keep his own reaction in check.

This, more than the pain of getting stitched closed, was torturous. His body proved itself to be unbelievably receptive to soaking up every nuance of her nearness. Her scent. Her warmth. The sound of cotton sliding over her skin as she shifted position. And for a brief, flashing second, he allowed himself to acknowledge that she was very likely nude beneath that billowing nightgown before he forcefully shoved every trace of the thought from his head.

He quickly sought a distraction and focused on her movements as she used a slim blade to slice more linen into strips. She wielded the knife with ease and grace. Within a few minutes, she had a small pile of long bandages. Then, with a flick of her thumb, the knife blade appeared to slide into its handle before she set it on the table.

"A handy little tool," he murmured appreciatively.

The corner of her mouth tilted in what he couldn't exactly describe as a smile. "Quite."

Then she turned to face him more squarely. "You'll need to sit up straight so I can get the bandages around you."

"Would it be easier if I stood?"

"If you're up to it."

He grunted in response to the doubt in her voice as he rose smoothly to his feet. Having no warning of his intention, she had to quickly swing her knees out of his way as she scrambled to rise as well. Her huff of breath suggested annoyance as she reached for the first strip of cloth before turning to face him with a disapproving scowl.

Dressed as she was and with her head barely reaching his shoulder, she shouldn't have been the least bit intimidating, but the stern look in her eyes had him clearing his throat.

Pressing her fingers between his over the wound site, she said, "I've got this. If you could lift your arms..."

Alastair raised his arms and linked his fingers behind his head to allow her better access to his torso. He could probably manage to apply the bandage on his own, though maybe with a little difficulty, but the woman seemed determined to see the task completed herself.

And apparently, he was in a mood to torture himself with her nearness a bit longer.

Starting at the wound site, she quickly and efficiently wrapped the linen around his body. The act required her to step into him as she passed the bandage behind his back. Her breath bathed his bare chest and her nightgown swirled about his legs. On the next pass, the end of her long braid tickled the sensitive skin of his belly, just above the edge of his breeches. He had to bite the inside of his cheek to halt the delicate shiver tracing across his skin.

Directing his gaze over her head to a spot on the wall, he forced his focus away from the gentle, assured work of her hands and the close proximity of her feminine warmth. The feelings coursing through him were not to be borne. She was his housekeeper, and as such, she was under his protection. And he was *not* the depraved wretch his sire had been.

Finishing with the last bandage, she tied it all off neatly then stepped back and assessed her work. After only a moment, her gaze began to wander, traveling intently across his belly, up over the contours of his chest, before halting awkwardly at his shoulders. Clearing her throat, she turned toward the table, as though the items there suddenly needed a great deal of attention.

But it was too late. Alastair lowered his arms to his sides with a heavy exhale. He'd seen the appreciation flickering in her eyes. The way her pupils expanded and her breath quickened.

Unable to move out of fear he'd lose the firm grip he retained on his body's physical reaction, he remained still and silent, staring at the capable slope of her shoulders and the slim line of her back.

"You'll need to change the bandage in the morning. You may take the rest of the poultice and linens to your room. Apply it at least once a day until the threat of infection has passed." She turned and handed him the basket containing the jar and remaining bandages. "Can you make it upstairs on your own?"

Her fine brows were arched over her gaze as looked up at him. And was that a teasing note in her voice?

Surely not.

He narrowed his stare, wondering how she'd respond if he asked her to assist him to his bedroom. Heat zinged through him like a flaming arrow.

Not a good idea.

"I'll manage," he said gruffly.

With a nod, she stepped away, but an impulse suddenly claimed him. Shifting the small basket to one hand, he reached out to grasp her wrist. Two of his fingers inadvertently slid across the concave of her palm, and she immediately stiffened in reaction. He had just a

brief moment to note the subtle callouses she bore before she lifted her chin to meet his gaze.

His throat felt thick as he spoke. "Thank you, Mrs. Evans."

Curiosity and something else flickered in her eyes. She didn't reply right away as she seemed to search his features for something. But then her attention dropped to his mouth before falling to where his hand encircled her slim wrist.

Though everything in him wanted to keep her, he let her go.

Stepping away from him, she wrapped her shawl more securely around her shoulders.

Alastair instantly hated himself for allowing his impulse to override proper behavior. It couldn't happen again.

He gave a respectful bow of his head. "Good evening."

"Good evening, my lord," she replied, but there was an added strain to her voice that made him wince.

It wasn't until he was nearly to his bedroom that Alastair recalled a few details he'd failed to fully note when he'd knocked on his housekeeper's door.

She hadn't been awakened by his knock. It was clear she hadn't even been abed. And he seriously doubted the woman was the slightest bit afraid of the dark.

His housekeeper's sleeping habits shouldn't be of any concern to him whatsoever, yet he couldn't shake the feeling that they *were* of some concern to him. And not just because there had been a moment tonight in Shelbourne's garden when he'd distinctly sensed his housekeeper's presence.

Of course she hadn't been there. Couldn't've been. But Alastair had been unable to get thoughts of the woman out of his mind, which had likely been the cause of his distraction, which had allowed him to come upon the other intruder without any warning.

He'd come to know Mrs. Evans as a firm and organized taskmaster. Though her youth was undeniable, her age did not negate her obvious experience and ability. Despite acknowledging that, however, he couldn't ignore there seemed to be a slight incongruence between her presentation and the rare hints he'd glimpsed of her inner character. It was curious and suggested his housekeeper's proper appearance and steady deference concealed a nature that was far less *domesticated* than she'd have people believe.

Still, it was stupid to even entertain the ridiculous possibility she'd been out and about, skulking through the neighbor's garden.

Seeing her tonight, dressed in the plain white nightgown and woolen shawl instead of a dark, buttoned-up frock, with her pale hair draped over her shoulder in a messy braid rather than being tucked up beneath a prim cap, it was impossible not to see her as a pretty young

woman deserving of his protection. That is, until the cagey look in her eyes had replaced the feigned sleepiness and her expression had shifted to one of contrived embarrassment.

It irritated him. Her tendency toward deception and concealment.

She was rather good, as well. Most people wouldn't have suspected a thing in her manner. But to someone who'd spent his childhood studying his mother's face for the slightest shift in mood which might result in a barrage of cruelty, Alastair wasn't most people.

He tried to tell himself his concern was due to the level of authority Mrs. Evans held in his home. He couldn't have a charlatan of any sort running his household. But he couldn't deceive himself. The truth was far more personal.

The woman intrigued him.

Lark.

It was a name that haunted his dreams.

Going to her room had been a mistake.

Reaching his bedroom, he closed the door behind him and slowly went about his evening routine, minus the bath. Though he would have enjoyed a good soak, he didn't want to ruin all the effort his housekeeper had gone to in tending his wound. He did, however, take the time to write down everything he'd observed and heard at Dryden's party and then afterward when he'd gone to inspect Shelbourne's empty residence.

He knew from his father's writings that the original members of the brotherhood held an expectation that each of their positions within the sect would be passed down to their eldest son. Given, of course, the heir's *worthiness*. The trick was in that the members were forbidden to discuss the brotherhood in any way with anyone outside of its calling. And that included their offspring. Each heir had to come to the brotherhood on his own.

He suspected Lord Lowndes was one such heir. Alastair needed them to believe he was another. Joining them was his best chance at gaining access to their secrets and their crimes.

Even with the proof of their perfidy and wickedness in hand, justice might be difficult to attain. The brotherhood had flourished for so many years because of the abundance of wealth and power possessed by each of its members, which allowed for endless bribes and security measures to ensure they were fortified against any attempts at exposing them or bringing their evil deeds to justice. Their strict rules of secrecy kept any one member from being very knowledgeable about the specific activities of the other members.

The only exception being their communal gatherings.

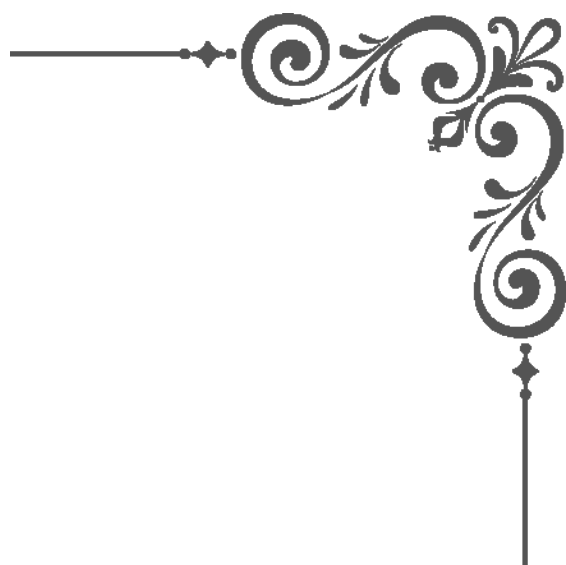
Lying carefully back in his bed, he closed his eyes and allowed the exhaustion to claim him. He hated having to don a façade of

hedonistic rake and reveler in order to convince them he was one of them. But it would be worth it when he finally obtained justice for his mother. And countless other women like her who'd fallen victim to callous lords.

As his mind and body softened, visions slowly filtered through his mind—of Mrs. Evans ensconced in midnight shadows, stepping out from behind heavy curtains, wearing a billowing cotton gown with her pale hair falling in waves down her back. Her keen gray eyes peering at him through the darkness.

Peering *through* him.

It sometimes felt as though she could see the truth in his soul and read the thoughts in his head...and damned him for them. Just as he damned himself.



Chapter Eleven

The next morning, the marquess once again requested his tea along with a breakfast. While Mrs. Reynard prepared the meal, Lark carried the tea tray to the morning room. Though the room maintained the same over-the-top style seen throughout the rest of the house, it was done in muted shades of sage green and pale gray. With the low-angled morning sun drifting through windows that overlooked the garden, the space was almost pretty.

The marquess was seated at the small table, his back to the windows and the newspaper raised in front of him.

Lark set the tea tray on a side table and spoke the words she said every morning. "Shall I pour?"

"Please." His voice was low and cold and utterly typical of him, which meant it gave nothing away as to how he was faring this morning.

When she set the teacup and saucer at his elbow, he finally lowered the newspaper. His countenance appeared the same as usual. His skin held no flush of color, and there was no sheen of feverish sweat glistening on his skin. Looking into his eyes, she did not detect a dilation of his pupils.

He looked as vitally handsome as always. Even when his dark brows furrowed heavily over his gaze. "Do I pass inspection, Mrs. Evans?"

She cleared her throat and took a step back. "Apologies, my lord." But then she couldn't keep herself from adding, "No sign of infection?"

"None at all."

"You changed the bandage?"

A pause. "I did."

"And the poultice?"

Setting the newspaper on the table, he leaned back in his chair to gaze up at her with a sharp look. "Shall I strip down to prove how well I've followed your instructions, Mrs. Evans?"

For some reason, his frigid, forbidding tone did little to intimidate her this morning. Was it because she'd seen him on the verge of fainting over a bit of blood?

"I doubt that'll be necessary," she replied easily. "And I wouldn't want you to miss breakfast now that you've finally decided to partake in what Cook has to offer."

His jaw tightened and Lark turned away before he could see her smile of satisfaction. But she didn't quite make it to the doorway before he stopped her.

"Mrs. Evans."

Replacing any evidence of amusement with a flat expression, she turned around to face him. "Yes, my lord?"

He remained silent for a long, uncomfortable moment. His posture strong and aristocratic. His chin lowered and his gaze hard and direct. She thought for certain he intended to take her to task for her impertinence. And he'd be right to do so.

She usually managed to keep such tendencies in check. The Yeardley Asylum for Girls had done a thorough job in breaking her of her most brazen habits. Most of the time, anyway.

But something about the marquess seemed to bring her toes to the line, as though she considered him an equal adversary rather than her employer and an aristocrat. It was a dangerous tack to take and one she couldn't afford considering how badly she needed this position.

She waited patiently for the inevitable reprimand. But when he continued to stare and said nothing, she started to fear he'd finally decided her impertinence was cause for dismissal.

She couldn't let that happen.

"My lord," she began, hoping her tone was properly deferring.

But before she could come up with anything to say that might excuse her impudence and dissuade him from taking offense, he lowered his attention back to the newspaper.

"Please ensure Cook includes some of the rose marmalade for which she is so renowned with breakfast this morning."

Lark gave a quick nod. "Of course, my lord." Then she turned and swiftly escaped back to the kitchens.



GIDEON'S GRANDDAUGHTERS had proven to be as accomplished as he'd claimed. Once Lark verified their references, she'd arranged for them all to start their new duties as soon as possible. Getting all three girls acclimated to their new positions would take nearly all of Lark's attention and most of her time over the next few days.

Thoughts of Harriet and questions about the marquess kept her mind whirling while she focused on her duties as housekeeper. Every moment she was delayed from discovering Harriet's whereabouts felt like a lifetime.

But another mystery had arisen. One she couldn't manage to let go. So, as soon as the marquess left the house that afternoon, Lark headed straight for his bedchamber.

The marquess's actions from the night before had roused too many

questions and suspicions for her to ignore. She needed to determine what he'd been about. Especially considering she couldn't completely discount the possibility that his behavior might somehow be connected to Harriet's disappearance.

Her experience in searching out hidden valuables from her time as a burglar came to the fore as she thoroughly searched his wardrobe and bureau before sliding her hand under his mattress and pillows. She checked every container and vase and behind the pictures and under the chairs. She even checked for loose floorboards, false drawers, and hidden cupboards.

She was just about to accept there was nothing to discover when she noted an oddity in the ornate fireplace. It was carved from marble decorated with dramatic Italianate medallions formed of gold filigree surrounding a large black onyx. She'd been examining the large antique clock set on the mantel when her fingers brushed lightly over one of the decorative medallions and she noticed the center onyx felt loose.

Curious, she retraced her fingers to the inlay and gently pressed.

Immediately, she heard a very soft snick, and a narrow wall panel right beside the fireplace shifted, opening just a tiny crack.

A secret passage.

The tingling rush of discovery washed through her. It was the same as when she'd been young and had happened upon a particularly valuable prize.

With her heart skipping to a faster pace, she stepped carefully toward the panel and gingerly slipped her fingers into the slim gap. Very little force was required to swing the panel fully open on silent hinges. Peering into the corridor revealed behind the door, Lark noted the deep darkness before her with a hint of trepidation.

But she'd come here to discover secrets and couldn't back away from the biggest one yet. She knew the marquess had gone to his club, and by her estimation, she still had plenty of time before he was likely to return. It might be a long time before she got another chance such as this.

Lighting a nearby candle to take with her, she stepped into the passage. Since she had absolutely no intention of getting trapped in the hidden corridor, she kept the panel open while she carefully examined in the interior of the doorway. After a bit of searching, she discovered the small hidden lever that would allow her back into the marquess's bedroom. Only then did she allow the panel to close soundlessly behind her.

If not for the candle she carried, she would have been enclosed in complete darkness.

With a deep breath, she started forward. The passage was very

narrow, so much so that she wondered how the marquess comfortably made it through considering the breadth of his shoulders. The walls were wood paneled, and the floor was covered in a thick, soundless carpet.

As she progressed, she considered what rooms she was moving behind. After about only fifteen paces, which would have put her right in line with the bedroom designated for the mistress of the house, she noticed that one section of the wall seemed different from the others. Feeling along the trim, she located a lever like the one at the door to the master bedroom. Rather than press it and risk coming upon anyone unaware, she continued along the passage, again, making mental note of where she was in the house. An unexpected turn in the corridor brought her to a tight winding staircase. Descending carefully, she noted that it went straight down to the ground level, where the passage turned and continued past the lord's study. There, she found another hidden lever. And in the far corner of the library, yet another.

She stopped then, her breath halting at the realization that it was the exact location where she'd thought she heard someone that night she'd sat in the library to read Harriet's letter. She'd been convinced she was wasn't alone.

Had she been right? Had the marquess been there the whole time, slipping back into the passage before she could discover him?

The thought chilled her and she quickly turned away.

From there, the passage descended once again, taking her underground. There, she found another door. This one, however, possessed a lock. Without her tools, she'd gone as far as she could that day. Turning back, she retraced her steps, counting each one and once again noting the locations of each exit into the house, until she reached the lord's bedchamber.

Before tripping the lever to open the panel, she listened carefully to ensure no one moved in the room beyond. Once certain she would not be discovered, she opened the panel, but before she could step through, her toes bumped against something tucked into the corner. Leaning down, she discovered a small wooden box. Though taking additional time was a decided risk, she brought the box with her into the light of the bedchamber.

She lifted the lid to find a thick sheaf of papers all rolled together and tied with string.

When she untied them and spread them out, she discovered it was a collection of notes written in Warfield's hand. They meticulously detailed his interactions with several gentlemen, more than one of whom resided on Curzon Street, including Lord Dryden. There were thorough descriptions of households accompanied by a few rough

sketches of floor plans. There were even notes on these gentlemen's closest family members and more casual associates, as well as their daily activities, hobbies, and recent business ventures, property holdings, and other financial documents.

A fierce thread of trepidation wound through her blood.

It was clear by Warfield's notes that he was collecting as much information on these men as possible. But toward what purpose? The men were of the highest echelon of society, each of them wealthy and influential. Was he intending blackmail, perhaps?

Wishing she could spend more time perusing the documents to determine exactly what it was the marquess was after, she was running out of time. Reluctantly, she rolled them back up and returned them to the box. The only other item inside was a small notebook. Taking it out, she noted that it appeared to be a journal of sorts, though it was written in a hand very different from that of the current marquess.

On the first page was written *The Extraordinary Life and Pleasures of the Highly Distinguished First Marquess of Warfield, A Memoir*.

Though Lark wasn't particularly interested in the life of the prior marquess, she flipped through the pages and scanned some of the entries. Not quite a memoir, the writing proved to be little more than a collection of disjointed memories and personal anecdotes. But it didn't take more than a minute of reading to start suspecting why the book was kept hidden. Another minute had her believing the book would be better off burned when she came across a disturbing description of sexual violence.

Disgusted, she returned the book to the box. She suddenly understood the current marquess's intense loathing for his father. She couldn't imagine how it must feel to discover such things about the man who'd sired you. The small bit she'd read of the memoir was boastful and shameless and made the prior marquess's selfish wickedness abundantly apparent.

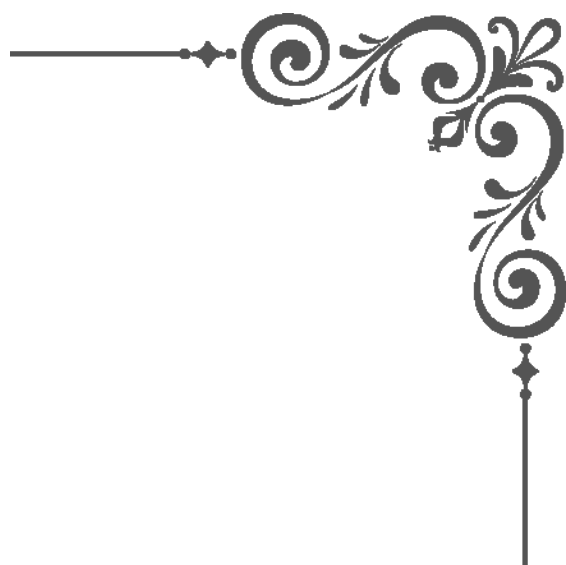
Then she recalled the other things he had said that night in the study.

Do you see evil in me, Mrs. Evans? Do you suppose we're destined to become another version of our parents?

Her stomach tightened as some unidentified emotion threatened to distract her from her purpose. With a shake of her head, she closed the box and returned it to its place within the hidden passageway. Then she closed the panel and made sure it clicked securely shut before extinguishing the candle. With a final careful glance about to ensure nothing had been left out of place by her search, she slipped from the room and returned to her duties.

But questions ran rampant in her mind throughout the day.

What was the nature of the marquess's interest in the gentlemen of Curzon? What were his motives? And most importantly, his ultimate goal? Was it related to his father's past? And could it have anything at all to do with Harriet's disappearance?



Chapter Twelve

Alastair approached the elegant red brick house at the end of the block on Curzon Street. The residence was quiet and still but for a faint light glowing from the second-level windows. Lowndes had indicated tonight's event was to be an extremely exclusive gathering. Alastair hoped that meant tonight's soiree would allow him a bit deeper into the brotherhood's secretive world.

Though the prospect of rubbing elbows with the very men he suspected of evil deeds filled him with tension and repugnance, being welcomed into their inner circle was the only way to gain access to the proof he needed to put an end—once and for all—to their activities.

He was greeted at the door by a footman, who simply gestured for Alastair to follow him across a gleaming marble foyer, up a curving staircase, to a pair of closed double doors. The footman paused there and gave a short, patterned knock.

The door was immediately opened by a near-identical footman on the other side, who turned and led Alastair across an elegant aristocratic drawing room that was softly illuminated by a crystal chandelier. A solo violinist played in the corner, but the room was otherwise unoccupied. Across the room was another set of double doors, also closed, at which the second footman paused. As the servant opened one of the doors, he stepped back, keeping the door between himself and the room beyond, essentially blocking his own view while gesturing for Alastair to enter.

Rich walnut hues and earthy tones met his gaze as he noted the room was much smaller than the drawing room, allowing space for a few sofas and chairs along with a gaming table. Alastair strode forward with an air of entitlement he'd worked hard to perfect over the last months. As the door quietly clicked closed behind him, he swept his gaze over the assortment of guests gathered in the intimate sitting room.

He was surprised to see Lord Dryden since Alastair thought he and his family had left London. Apparently, the lord had stayed behind. He stood near a liquor service talking with the rather somber Earl of Altham and another aged gentleman Alastair didn't recognize. Across the room stood the solitary, stooped figure of Viscount Marlowe, likely the oldest man present, who seemed more interested in nursing his

brandy than participating in idle conversation with the other guests. Lastly, seated before the fire was the haughty Lord Hazelton, who tapped his foot impatiently as he stared into the flames.

Counting Lord Lowndes, who'd been seated in a chair next to Hazelton and rose to his feet at Alastair's arrival, there were only six men in attendance. Four of them, he'd already confirmed as being part of his father's little club, and Lord Lowndes, he highly suspected. There was only one man in the room he didn't recall ever being introduced to. If this was truly a gathering of the brotherhood, it was only half of the original membership. His father and Shelbourne were obviously deceased, but where were the others? *Were* there any others?

"Welcome, Warfield," Lowndes greeted as he stepped up to Alastair and offered his hand.

Giving a slight bow of his head, Alastair replied in a casual tone, "Thank you for the invitation, though I have to admit, after your talk of forbidden pleasures"—he arched a brow and glanced at the other guests with very subtle hint of disdain—"I can't say this is what I expected."

Lowndes chuckled and leaned forward with a conspiratorial glimmer in his black eyes. "Just wait, my lord. All will be revealed in its time." Straightening again, he swept a hand toward the liquor service. "Come have a drink as we await the arrival of a final guest. I don't believe you've yet made the acquaintance of Lord Buckley, a dear friend of my late father's. I'd be honored to introduce you."

As the hour progressed, the almost subdued atmosphere in the room slowly became more anticipatory. Alastair heard a few grumblings about the delay caused by the last expected guest, but for the most part, the gentlemen focused their conversation on idle topics like the races or the weather.

As Alastair struggled to feign interest in an investment venture in which Viscount Marlowe had recently been successful, a bell chimed from the corner of the room.

"About time," Hazelton muttered as he rose to his feet.

A few minutes later, the door opened, and an elderly gentleman strode confidently into the room despite the ebony cane he appeared to require. "Apologies, my friends, for the late arrival."

"No need for concern, Your Grace," Lowndes replied as he approached the newcomer. "We all know how difficult it can be for you to get away. We're grateful you've made it."

Marlowe made a low sound but didn't contradict their host.

"Would you like a drink before we commence the evening?"

"Some of that brandy you stock, Lowndes, would be appreciated."

"Of course."

As the two men crossed to the liquor service, the others in the room started to gather more closely in the center of the room, clearly anticipating what would come next.

Alastair tried to release the tension flowing through him. It would not do for any of them to note the resistance in his manner. Lowndes had said tonight would be just a taste, but Alastair knew it was more likely a test. They were not going to share any of their secrets until they determined his loyalty and believed he was one of them. If he was ever to gain access to the proof needed to end their arcane activities, he'd need to prove himself first. And that meant he'd need to play their game.

Once the newcomer had his drink, Lowndes led him to where Alastair stood with Marlowe. The two older men gave each other a nod in acknowledgment before their host offered an introduction.

"Your Grace, allow me to introduce you to Lord Warfield. Lord Warfield, our esteemed friend, the Duke of Chesterfield."

"I knew your father well, my boy. We were in school together and enjoyed a great many adventures in our younger years."

Alastair bit back the urge to ask if the duke had been one of the men in the crowd the night a young Irish maid had been repeatedly raped by his old chum. In truth, he didn't need to ask. He already suspected most of the men here had been there that night, with Lowndes being the only obvious exception.

"An honor to meet you, Your Grace." The words were vile on his tongue.

"Now that we're all present, shall we get this evening started?" Lowndes asked with a suggestive smirk.

"By all means," Chesterfield replied before giving Alastair an unsubtle nudge with his elbow. "You're going to enjoy this, my boy."

Alastair's stomach clenched so tight he couldn't manage a reply. Luckily, one wasn't needed as Lowndes stepped up to the fireplace and turned to address his guests.

"Welcome, friends. It has been too long since we've had an opportunity to come together and enjoy some of the finer things in life. I hope my offerings in that regard will please everyone this evening. As always, anything that occurs in the next room remain sacred to this space and are not to be discussed beyond these walls."

His black eyes fell to Alastair as he stated the last and held there until he gave a subtle nod in response.

Then Lowndes performed a short bow before striding to one of the tall bookcases that flanked the fireplace. Sliding his hand beneath one of the shelves, he released a hidden lever that allowed the entire bookcase to swing open on silent hinges, revealing a short corridor leading to a well-lit room.

Alastair resisted the urge to sneer. Of course, another secret passage. These men sure as hell enjoyed their subterfuge and drama.

“Come along, gentlemen. The night begins.”

As the others filed into the next room at an unhurried though expectant pace, Alastair tried to hang back, hoping to have just a moment alone to examine the mechanism which had opened the secret doorway.

Unfortunately, Chesterfield noticed his hesitation and tapped Alastair’s shoulder with the silver tip of his cane as he offered an encouraging wink. “No need to dally, my boy. Nothing to worry about in this. Your father lived for parties like these. It’s a grand time, I assure you. A *grand* time.”

“I’m breathless with anticipation, Your Grace,” Alastair replied.

The old man laughed as he gestured for Alastair to precede him into the concealed antechamber.

Clenching his back teeth in frustration at being rushed past the entry, he barely managed to keep an appropriately anticipatory expression as he acquiesced.

When he’d first read his sire’s notes describing the types of *entertainments* in which the brotherhood indulged, he’d imagined them taking place in dank, dark dungeons. Such settings would certainly have been more in line with what his mother had detailed in the unsent letters to her family. However, as he’d discovered when he and Hale retrieved Lady Katherine from Shelbourne’s clutches, the brotherhood seemed to have a penchant for the over-gilded and the theatrical.

The setting for tonight’s gathering was a large but intimate gentlemen’s sitting room decorated in a scheme of black, white, and gold. Pristine marble floors, black-brocade-covered walls, gold-painted molding, and gleaming gold sconces. Even the furniture was upholstered in gold silk. Additionally, the room contained three felt-covered card tables, a roulette wheel, and a table for dice. Two liveried footmen with appropriately blank expressions stood along the opposite wall holding trays of champagne.

And scattered about the room—in various positions and poses designed to seduce and entice—were an array of gorgeous women. They were all dressed in costumes of the prior century with wide, layered skirts, corsets that cinched waists, and stiff brocade bodices that shoved bosoms to overflowing. The gowns were of every color, and the ladies were in possession of figures to please any taste. The dramatic looks were accented by heavily kohled eyes, darkly rouged lips, and beauty patches, along with elaborate powdered wigs fashioned into fantastical designs depicting such impossible things as topiary, a trellis of roses, birds in flight, and even a three-masted ship.

Alastair was relieved to see the ladies all appeared to be present willingly. High-end prostitutes and courtesans, most likely.

Chesterfield gave another nudge with his cane as he came up beside Alastair to leer at the occupants of the room. "Didn't I tell you?"

He didn't reply. He didn't need to as the duke sauntered toward a woman reclining elegantly on a gilded chaise, a champagne flute held lightly in her slim fingers.

"Your Grace," she greeted silkily, "such a pleasure to see you again."

"It will be."

By the woman's words, Alastair gathered that she at least, and possibly others present, had attended similar events in the past. Tonight was not likely to be one of the cursed nights like that which his mother had endured. Knowing that, he tried to relax, to sink into the atmosphere of the evening in order to prove to those observing that he would be open to more deviant experiences. So, when a lady in a striking blue gown and a towering coiffure approached him with an easy smile, he met her flashing silver eyes with a suggestion of interest in his gaze.

"Good evening, my lord." She flicked a glance toward the glass in his hand. "It appears you're in need of another drink." Her eyes tilted suggestively. "Shall I fetch it for you?"

Lowering his voice to a slow drawl, Alastair replied, "You can do whatever you'd like, love."

Her smile widened, flashing even white teeth as she slipped her hand through his arm. "Ahhh," she breathed huskily, "I do believe we're going to get along famously. Please, call me Lady Sapphire." She tipped her head toward one of the footmen who started toward them. "Is champagne to your liking?"

"It is."

The lady smiled coyly at the footman, who stopped at her side. Alastair could have sworn she snuck the servant a saucy wink, but it was too quick to be sure. Lady Sapphire was a bold one. And quite stunning with her pouty mouth and sparkling eyes.

But Alastair was disconcerted to acknowledge that he felt very little beyond general appreciation for her undeniable beauty. Apparently, his taste ran more toward blondes with a deceptively staid demeanor and stormy rather than silver eyes.

Just the thought of his housekeeper caused a fierce tightening through his core.

Lady Sapphire leaned close to him, tipping her chin up to show off the slim length of her throat and daring décolletage. "Something amiss, my lord?"

Alastair smoothed the scowl from his brow and cast a quick glance about the room. The other gentlemen guests were settling down to cards or had chosen their own sparkling companion. Lord Marlowe, in fact, already had his hand shoved up the skirts of one laughing lady who perched on his lap.

Though his back teeth clenched tight, he had to play the part.

“Not at all, love,” he replied before sipping from his champagne.

Lady Sapphire gave a seductive lift of one shoulder. “I get the sense you’re not interested in gambling. Shall we find a nice place to sit and chat?”

A game of cards would be a far better option considering it would give him a proper excuse to avoid a similar display to that of Marlowe and now Hazelton, who was pressing a woman in an emerald gown against the wall behind the fall of a black velvet curtain.

Though the female giggled encouragingly, it still infuriated Alastair how careless and callous the men were proving to be. There was no seduction. These men clearly believed the women were theirs for the taking. They might have paid for the pleasure, but their behavior was crude and tawdry.

“Come, my lord,” Lady Sapphire whispered in her husky voice as she linked her arm securely through his to lead him to a cushioned bench positioned in a darkened alcove he hadn’t previously noticed.

Once seated, the lady angled herself toward him and pressed her shoulder intimately to his as she took his hand and rested it atop hers in her lap. Smiling at him, she fluttered her thick lashes seductively. “No need to be so tense, Lord Warfield. I swear I won’t do anything you don’t want me to.”

The amusement in her tone had Alastair raising a brow. Then he realized she’d called him by name, which had not been given. Before he could shift his expression or consider questioning how she knew who he was, she gave a wink and leaned forward to whisper in his ear.

“We have a shared interest, my lord. And a shared *friend*.”

Who the hell was this woman and what was she doing here?

Alastair brought his hand to the side of her face, holding her securely in place as he tipped his head to return her whisper. “Explain, madam.”

She laughed softly before breathing a single word. “Hale.”

Alastair stiffened but retained his pose of seduction. “That’s not an explanation.”

Pulling back in resistance to his subtle hold, the lady tapped his arm as her gaze slid pointedly to the side. For a second, he detected a flare of warning in her eyes, but then it was gone and she gave another throaty chuckle. “Don’t be coy, my lord,” she teased before

dropping her voice to a low and private murmur once again. "Would you feel better if I mentioned your cousin? Lady Blackwell?"

"That depends," he replied darkly, "on your intentions."

"Our intentions are the same as yours, of course."

"*Our?*"

Just as he asked the question, the footman who'd provided their champagne was at their sides.

Lady Sapphire looked up at the servant with an intent gaze. "Thank you, darling," she murmured as she exchanged her empty glass for a full one.

The footman's perfectly stoic expression shifted momentarily into a dark frown before he turned to offer his tray to Alastair.

Feeling as though there was more going on than it appeared on the surface, he looked intently at the servant while he took another glass. There was nothing particularly suspect about the man. He looked like every other footman Alastair had ever noted. Except, that is, for when the servant's attention fell upon the gorgeous woman seated beside him. In those instances, for a flash of a brief moment, there was a distinct flicker of possession in the man's eyes.

"That shall be all." Lady Sapphire's directive was accompanied by a dismissive little wave.

The footman straightened and crossed the room to take a position where he could observe every moment between Alastair and the lady beside him.

"Your bodyguard?" he asked quietly.

Her throaty laugh was warm and lovely. "Husband, actually."

Alastair contained his surprise and confusion behind an easy smile in case anyone other than the footman happened to be watching them. "Oh, my dear, I think your explanations have only just begun."

The lady gave a shrug and sipped her champagne with a saucy smile. "Since this party seems to be getting a little...dull," she noted with a jaded glance about at the other gentlemen, who had started taking a more enthusiastic interest in the provided entertainment, "perhaps we should adjourn to a more intimate setting."

He hesitated, wondering what exactly her game was. And how she was possibly associated with Hale and his cousin. Before he could form a reply to her suggestion, Lowndes approached with a twitch of annoyance on his face.

"Don't tell me you intend to spend this evening *talking* to such a tempting piece, my lord?"

"Not at all." Alastair rose to his feet before offering a hand to Lady Sapphire, bringing her up beside him. She slipped her arm through his, stepping close against his side as she did so. "In fact," Alastair continued, "I expect you won't mind if we depart early."

Lowndes arched his brows. "You're stealing one of my party favors?"

"Just for the evening." Catching the other lord's gaze, he narrowed his gaze intently. "I have rather specific plans for this one, and I'm afraid I didn't bring along the proper...tools."

Lowndes responded to Alastair's cryptic explanation with a licentious grin. "Of course, my lord. I promised you the freedom to explore whatever pleasures you desired this night. I wouldn't dream of disrupting your plans."

Giving a nod of appreciation, Alastair looked down into a glittering gaze and sultry smile. "Shall we?"

"I can't wait, my lord," she breathed.

As they crossed through the room, Alastair glanced carelessly about, expecting to see the footman watching them with a sullen stare. To his surprise, the man was nowhere to be seen. Redirecting his focus toward the escape before the activities erupting all about the room were indelibly burned into his mind, he rushed them through the door. Hopefully, his hasty exit would be perceived as lusty impatience for the supposed night ahead rather than disgust for what he was leaving behind.

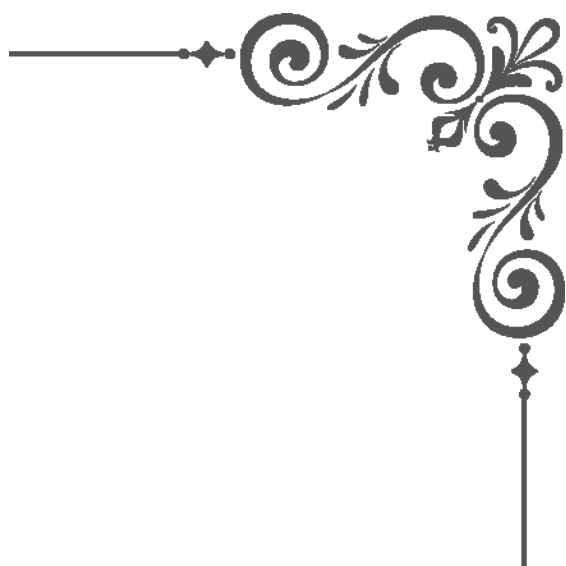
The rest of Lowndes's townhouse was quiet as a tomb. He and his unexpected companion did not disrupt the hush with any idle chatter as they made their way to the front door. Once on the front stoop, Alastair noted, "I don't have my carriage, but the walk isn't far."

"No bother. I've my own."

At that moment, a small, nondescript carriage rolled up, driven by a man with the stooped shoulders and curved spine of an old man wearing a voluminous black coat.

"Won't your *husband* wonder where we've gone?" he asked as he handed the lady into the vehicle. A challenging task considering her costume.

Her response was a throaty laugh that sounded surprisingly genuine. "Not at all, my lord."



Chapter Thirteen

Alastair stood with his back to the fireplace, his hands clasped behind his back as he watched the lovely Lady Sapphire settle gracefully on the sofa. Her wide hooped and layered skirts took up the full width of the cushions.

He glanced toward the liquor service. "Would you like a drink?"

"A splash of brandy would be lovely," she replied readily.

After pouring a finger for her and two for himself, he returned to her side. The lady gazed up at him with a tilted head and a gleam of intelligent curiosity in her eyes as she took the snifter. "Thank you, my lord."

He arched a brow.

She grinned.

"I assume you intend to explain your cryptic remarks from earlier."

She waved a dismissive hand. "Of course. Just as soon as my husband joins us."

As though simply awaiting his cue, a young man strode confidently into the parlor. In possession of a lean-muscled frame, brown hair, and strong yet common features, the newcomer crossed the room with a straight posture and unhurried gait. Despite his rather average appearance, Alastair sensed an interesting air of self-assurance in the man. Something in his steady gaze suggested a level of experience that went beyond his age.

It certainly wasn't the footman the lady had claimed as her husband earlier. He was right to have suspected a lie in that declaration. This man carried himself with far too much confidence, and Lowndes's footman certainly hadn't possessed such an intense gaze.

The newcomer's focus went first to the woman seated casually on the sofa in a thorough assessment. But then he shifted his attention to Alastair as he came to a halt and offered a respectful bow of his head. "Dell Turner, my lord." When the man glanced back to the lady, Alastair noted how the firm press of the man's mouth briefly softened while his eyes sparked possessively. "And my wife, Portia."

Focusing his attention on Turner's features, he suddenly noted the details in another way. With a twinge of shock, he realized it *was* the footman. *And* the driver.

"I can see you've figured out our game, my lord." Mrs. Turner's

tone was amused and slightly admiring.

"It's not a game, Portia."

The lady rolled her eyes at her husband's quick and stern correction before replying smoothly, "A matter of perspective, my love."

At another time, Alastair might have been amused by their interplay. Tonight, however, another matter claimed his focus. "Have a seat, Mr. Turner. Can I get you a drink?"

"No, thank you."

"Then I understand an explanation is forthcoming? In particular, the reason the two of you were at Lowndes's party."

Portia Turner leaned back and pressed her hands to her tightly corseted middle. "I already told you. Our mutual friend, Mason Hale."

Alastair was about to retort that that told him nothing when Turner succinctly clarified, "Hale hired us to follow up on the recent activities perpetrated against his betrothed and her young brother. Your cousins, I understand."

"Hired you to do what exactly?"

"Investigate."

"Castrate," Portia added with another charming grin.

Alastair frowned. "Why Lowndes?"

Though Turner's brow quirked at Alastair's blunt query, he replied in an easy tone. "He was at the house party from which Shelbourne abducted Lady Blackwell. To determine if he was more deeply involved, I secured a position in his household in order to gain more intimate access to his life."

"And?"

There was a long pause as Turner simply stared back at him in response to his one-word question. Then, the man slowly shifted his posture and crossed one ankle over the opposite knee. "Allow me to make something clear, my lord. I work for Mr. Hale and, by extension, Lady Blackwell. If Lady Blackwell hadn't specifically requested that we include you in our investigations should such an opportunity arise, we wouldn't be here now. You would never've known the true reasons for our presence at that party," Turner noted in a level tone.

Alastair considered the other man very carefully. He could acknowledge the Turners' effectiveness in infiltrating Lowndes's household, but he couldn't risk their interference causing trouble now that he was finally getting somewhere. "Although I appreciate Hale's desire to keep my cousins safe, his—and your—interference in this matter could very well do just the opposite."

Portia Turner leaned forward, not without some difficulty in her costume, and offered a winning smile. "Perhaps if we shared information, we could all be better prepared for what we're up

against, my lord.”

Alastair was reluctant to trust them. Even if their purpose was similar, he was wary of risking his own tenuous position with the brotherhood.

“I understand your reluctance,” Turner said calmly. “But I assure you, we share the same goal.”

Alastair lifted a brow. “Do we?”

Turner was unphased by Alastair’s curt tone. “I’ve been doing this sort of work for many years, my lord, and I’ve never failed to see a job to its desired end.”

“I suppose you cannot offer any references to support such a claim?”

Turner smiled. An emotionless expression. “Due to the often sensitive nature of the work I do, the identities of my clients are obviously protected. That you haven’t heard of my past assignments is all the proof I can offer that they’ve been done. Well and discreetly.”

Alastair said nothing for a while.

There was not much being offered to inspire the trust required to bring an utter stranger in on such a personal and vital issue. But he had to appreciate the man’s devotion to discretion. Despite his caginess, Turner projected an undeniable air of competence in his quiet focus.

He met the other man’s hard gaze. “I apologize for my distrustful manner, Mr. Turner. The issue at hand is of personal importance to me.”

“We understand, of course,” Portia interjected softly. “Every job becomes quite personal to us, as well.”

Alastair wasn’t quite sure Turner shared that same sentiment, but he could see Portia was being utterly honest.

He sighed. He was going to trust these strangers after all.

“I imagine Hale explained the connection between Shelbourne and the prior marquess.”

Turner nodded. “We’ve confirmed that Lowndes was also involved with Shelbourne in a manner beyond what might have been readily apparent. I’m sure a few follow-up inquiries will confirm that the other gentlemen present tonight are also members of the secret society you described to Hale.”

“I’ve no doubt of that, Mr. Turner.” Alastair leaned forward to set his snifter back on the table, untouched. “But that brings the total to nine when you count Shelbourne and my father. There were once twelve. What of the others?”

“It’s possible they’re no longer involved. Or they may have died in the years since. I’m still looking into the histories and connections associated with all of these men, so if I uncover any additional names,

I'll certainly share them."

Though it wasn't the answer he'd hoped for, Alastair nodded.

"I did discover something of interest this evening," Turner noted as he shifted a glance toward his wife. "Before the others arrived, Lord Lowndes and Viscount Marlowe were discussing a rather important event scheduled to take place soon. While tonight was a more informal gathering, this event was clearly expected to be something else. They didn't go into much detail, but I understand it will not be taking place in Mayfair, and it will include guests beyond the brotherhood themselves."

Alastair stilled as Turner's words twisted through his mind. *An important event.*

"Wait a moment," Portia said thoughtfully, pulling Alastair from his thoughts. She was looking at her husband intently. "One of the girls tonight pulled me aside before we arrived to give me some advice as the *new girl*. She made a clear point of warning me that the lords could be rather intense in their pleasures, which was to be expected, but that if any of them expressed an interest in taking me to a private party outside of Mayfair, I should make any excuse possible to refuse. She was quite adamant, but before I could question her further, our discussion was interrupted."

"She gave no indication of why you should avoid it?" Alastair pressed.

"I'm afraid not," Portia replied before directing the next words to Turner once again. "But I know how to reach her. I believe I can get her talk to me in more depth."

Turner's expression darkened as he shifted his attention from his wife back to Alastair. Arching a brow, he asked, "I understand you advised Hale that you had no need for assistance in your investigation. Have you changed your mind on that issue?"

There was an obvious pause. "It seems I must have," he said finally and hoped he wasn't making a mistake.

"Am I right in assuming you provided Hale and Lady Katherine with only a vague overview of this issue?" When Alastair didn't deny it, Turner added, "It'll save a great deal of time and resources if you shared everything you've discovered about the brotherhood's activities. Past and present."

"Everything?" Alastair asked coolly. "Is that all?"

"Every detail," Turner noted evenly. "There's no telling what might be a critical bit of information."

If he was going to take on partners in this endeavor, he realized he couldn't do it in half measure. "I understand."

Over the next hour and a half, he imparted the facts as he knew them, whether gleaned from his mother's distressed accusations over

the years and her letters, his sire's notes on the brotherhood's activities, or his own investigations to date. He left out nothing of his suspicions regarding the brotherhood's suspected connections to the missing housemaids over the last few years. When he began to disclose the bits of evidence he'd gathered on that topic, the Turners shared an intense glance. And all the while, Turner took meticulous notes in a notebook he withdrew from his pocket as Portia interjected with ever more pertinent, pointed, and insightful questions along the way.

"These noblemen target girls and young women who they consider of no consequence. They lure them and trick them and deceive them into trusting them. Then they use them for their amusement and pleasure. They've been doing it for decades. And these women have had no recourse for justice. No way to fight back. If any of them did, they were quickly silenced." He clenched his teeth. "And now, young women are going missing with disturbing regularity. Never to be heard from again. We may learn of a great deal more once we have the names of the other members."

Turner nodded.

"It's truly frightening how long these men have been allowed to operate," Portia muttered.

"They've got powerful allies, Mrs. Turner. Garnered through favors, blackmail, or cash. People who may not know exactly what they're helping to cover up but who are willing to accept the benefits of doing as they're told. Constables, judges, even a member of the royal household. I assure you, my dissolute sire didn't *earn* his title through noble means."

"Well"—Turner sighed as he slipped his notebook back into his pocket—"this certainly puts the investigation into greater context."

"We need undisputable proof of their crimes. And undeniable evidence linking each of the men involved," Alastair insisted.

"Information that cannot be disputed or covered up through bribery."

"I imagine you will be angling for an invitation to the upcoming event," Turner noted.

"Of course."

"Hopefully, our early departure this evening won't cause any damage to your licentious character, my lord," Portia noted.

Her husband made a low sound that might have been dissent or reluctant agreement. But he gave a short nod to his wife then rose to his feet. Extending his hand to the lady, he drew her easily to his side.

Alastair felt the need to offer a fair warning as he also stood. "I appreciate the risk you took this evening, Mrs. Turner, and although I'd be grateful for your continued efforts, I must stress the degree of danger these men pose. Do not underestimate what they're capable

of.”

The lady arched a fine black brow and narrowed her gaze just a bit. “I wouldn’t underestimate *me*, either, Lord Warfield.”

Turner’s voice was firm with pride and conviction. “My wife is very competent in her role. She wouldn’t be my partner if it were otherwise.”

While the lady in question beamed at her husband’s reply, Alastair met his hard stare. For a man who seemed to convey such a neutral demeanor and appearance, there was suddenly a great deal to be read in those eyes.

With a chuckle, Portia patted her husband’s arm. “Shall we be off, darling? We’ve much yet to do this night. And I’m anxious to start with getting myself out of this infernal getup. Of all the costumes I’ve worn, this must be the worst.”

Turner’s expression shifted from his stoic facade for the first time as he leaned down to whisper something in her ear that brought an immediate sparkle to her eye and a blush to her cheeks.

Alastair felt a need to clear his throat. “Allow me to see you out.”

Before leaving, Turner paused and turned back to Alastair. “You mentioned your father’s memoir, my lord. Might I borrow the notes for a time?”

Tensing, Alastair nodded. “It’s a personal accounting of his experiences within the brotherhood prior to his exile. Although it goes into a great deal of detail regarding his own depraved experiences, it will not likely have much of benefit referring to the brotherhood’s current activities.”

“I’d like to review it all the same, my lord? Along with anything else you think could be helpful to our investigations. I assure you the information will be viewed by no one but myself.”

Alastair hesitated. To hand over something so damning and shameful went against his instincts. But Turner was right. The more he knew, the better.

“I’ll be just a moment.”

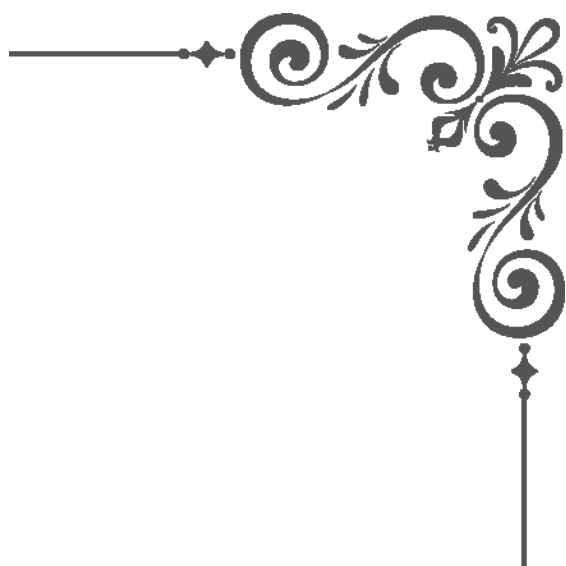
Leaving them in the hall, he ascended the stairs two at a time to his bedroom. He withdrew the box from the passage and opened it to retrieve his notes and his father’s notebook. But before he could do so, something caught his attention, and he hesitated as a frisson of alarm snaked through him.

It was a small thing. So minor he’d nearly missed it, actually. But he was a man of habit. And he always retied his gathered notes in the same way. Yet it was clear to see that they were currently bound with a different knot.

He realized he could have been distracted when he’d last gone through them—what? A few days ago, now—and he might have tied

them differently without thinking. But some instinct told him that wasn't the case.

Someone else had read them, which meant they'd also likely read his father's memoir notes. It also meant the secret passage was no longer quite so secret.



Chapter Fourteen

A few hours later, Alastair found himself standing in the darkened library, directing a harshly focused gaze out the window, across the silent garden, to the line of houses that stood on Curzon Street.

For good or ill, he'd joined forces with the Turners. Though disturbed at the thought of handing over every bit of the information he'd taken months to acquire, he hoped it had been the right decision. His notes and such were probably better off with Turner now that someone else had found them. And the secret passage.

Could it be one of the brotherhood? Had they somehow discovered his ruse and turned his investigative efforts back on him? Had they sent someone to search his house?

He rather doubted it but couldn't discount it completely.

One of his servants, then?

He didn't like to think a member of his household would have snooped with such intent and focus as to stumble across a hidden passage, but he had to consider it a possibility.

As he stood there, staring into the night with his thoughts, he detected a faint, barely perceptible movement in the shadows of the mews not far beyond his garden gate. Someone was out there. Coming on the heels of his recent discovery, the sight wasn't as great a surprise as it should've been. Anticipation coursed through his blood.

On instinct and without a second thought, he left the library and exited the house. He crept silently through the garden toward the gate opening to the mews. Then he paused and searched along the darkened lane for another hint of movement.

There. Not far up ahead.

Alastair followed the silent figure at a significant distance, making sure to keep them in his sight while ensuring he gave no cause for them to suspect they were being followed.

Whoever it was, they were small in stature, wore black from head to toe, and were almost unnaturally agile. They also appeared to know exactly where they were going. Seeming to prioritize stealth over speed, they darted swiftly through the shadows one moment, then paused for long periods in the next, assumedly to listen and observe for anyone else who might be out and about in the middle of the night.

Soon enough, the figure stopped just beyond the garden entrance

to Dryden House. When Alastair looked up to see that the three-story home was completely darkened, he recalled that although Dryden had been present at Lowndes's party, he'd lamented the fact that his family had gone to the country earlier that day for an extended stay, and unfortunately, he was expected to follow that very night, cutting his pleasures short.

Whoever was currently making swift work of the lock on the back door was apparently aware that the house would be empty. It was possible the person he'd followed was nothing more than a housebreaker and thief. But some instinct told him this was something else.

It briefly crossed his mind that it could be the same person who'd accosted him in Shelbourne's, but he immediately discounted that possibility since the two couldn't have been more opposite in stature and bulk. There was also the fact that the stealthy figure's movements and form were disturbingly familiar. He did not believe this was a simple robbery, and he felt compelled to observe it to its end.

Within less than twenty minutes, the small figure reemerged. Empty-handed.

Not a thief, then. Unless the prize was small enough to fit snugly in a pocket.

Alastair again kept his distance, following the stealthy form as they darted through the neighborhood. If Alastair wasn't so familiar with the lanes and alleys himself, he'd have lost sight of them much sooner than he did. Unfortunately, he came around a blind corner to find the streets empty and devoid of movement.

Blast.

Though he had nothing concrete to suggest the housebreaker's motives had anything to do with him or the brotherhood, he couldn't discount the insistent hint of familiarity he'd experienced while following the shrouded figure.

As soon as he had the thought, the image of Mrs. Evans rose to mind, and he recalled her contradictory manner and those times she'd proven to be quite adept at deception.

The suspicion that was forming bothered him. Deep in his soul, it unnerved him. But it remained a possibility he couldn't fully discredit. Then again, it might be desperation and paranoia triggered by his own immersion in subterfuge that had him suspecting his own housekeeper of creeping about the neighborhood in the black of night.

But as he entered his garden, he couldn't help but cast a glance to the small windows of Mrs. Evans's room. Though no light shone from within, he couldn't glance away.

And then, he could've sworn he saw the drapes move. Just a bit.

A rush of awareness sharpened his mind in a quick moment as he

recalled the night he'd thought he'd sensed her in Shelbourne's garden and the fact that she'd still been awake—despite her claim otherwise—when he'd returned home with a knife slash along his side.

If it *was* her slinking through the night, what business could his housekeeper possibly have with Lord Dryden?



LARK STOOD AT THE WINDOW in her darkened bedroom, carefully concealing herself behind her drapes as she peered into the garden, where Lord Warfield stood beside a row of overgrown roses, oddly still and staring in her direction.

What was he doing out and about so late and on foot?

She'd made sure to wait until he'd returned from his night out and the house had gone silent before she'd dressed in boys' togs and tucked her pale hair beneath a heavy knit cap. She'd accessed Warfield's secret passage from the study, then she'd continued down to the lower level and that locked door she'd encountered previously. Except this time, she had her tools.

After making quick work of the lock, she'd explored the underground tunnel and was pleased to find that it had brought her to an old carriage house in the mews. From there, she'd crept through the darkness to Dryden House.

She'd learned through servant gossip that the Dryden family had left London for their country estate, where they'd stay through the Christmas holiday. Most of their household accompanied them, leaving their London residence with a very minimal staff. The maid had said their housekeeper had gathered all of Harriet's belongings, but Lark knew exactly where to look if there had been anything of value she'd wished to keep safe.

After leaving Dryden House, she'd been alarmed to discover someone was following her. But the alarm turned to shock when she caught a glimpse of her pursuer and instantly recognized the marquess.

She'd managed to evade him easily enough. But she worried what he'd seen. Had he recognized her as easily as she had him?

Unlikely.

Watching him through her window now, she felt a twinge of fear. Then he appeared to sigh before continuing toward the house. A moment later, she heard a very subtle indication of movement as he passed near her door on his way to the servants' stairway. She held her breath, half-convinced he'd stop and knock on her door to accuse her of...whatever he might suspect she could be doing out in the middle of the night. Thievery, most likely.

When his steps continued, she released a sigh.

He hadn't recognized her. If he had, he'd have been obligated to confront her about such suspect behavior.

Not that he wasn't without his own questionable activities. Hadn't she caught him sneaking into the abandoned Shelbourne mansion? And then there was the knife wound and his meticulous notes on his neighbors and the secret passage and underground tunnel.

So many questions...

She didn't want to believe Warfield had been involved in Harriet's disappearance, but she couldn't completely discount it either. For her own state of mind, she'd need to discover what her employer was up to.

But tonight, she had something more pressing to pursue.

Searching Harriet's old room had proven successful. Though the maid had been truthful in that Harriet's personal belongings had been removed, Lark knew something the housekeeper wouldn't've. The constant thievery amongst girls in the asylum had conditioned her friend into a habit of carefully hiding precious items to keep them safe.

In the small attic bedroom of Dryden House, concealed in a gap created by a loose section of trim around the window overlooking the street, Lark had discovered a small packet of letters tied within a handkerchief.

Now in the safety of her bedroom, she reached into the pocket of her trousers and withdrew the letters to set them carefully on her desk before quickly shedding her dark clothing and dressing in a nightgown.

Sitting at the desk, she lit a single candle and unwrapped the handkerchief. Eleven letters in all. Each written in the same slashing male hand, addressed simply to Harriet. As there was no address noted, Lark had to assume they'd been transferred from writer to recipient by hand.

She didn't have to read for long to realize they were love letters. The first was a tentative admittance of feeling, citing a brief encounter on the street that seemed to have occupied the author's thoughts without rest, inspiring him to pen the note. The next expressed sincere and emotional gratitude for learning in her reply that his feelings were not one-sided.

Lark found herself stirred by the man's confessions of love and passion for her dear friend. But she wondered why Harriet had never mentioned him in any of her letters to Lark. Based on the dates in the missives, their affair had gone on for a few months and had included more than one clandestine meeting.

Unfortunately, they were all signed very simply with the initials W.K.

Who was he?

And could he have knowledge of Harriet's current whereabouts?

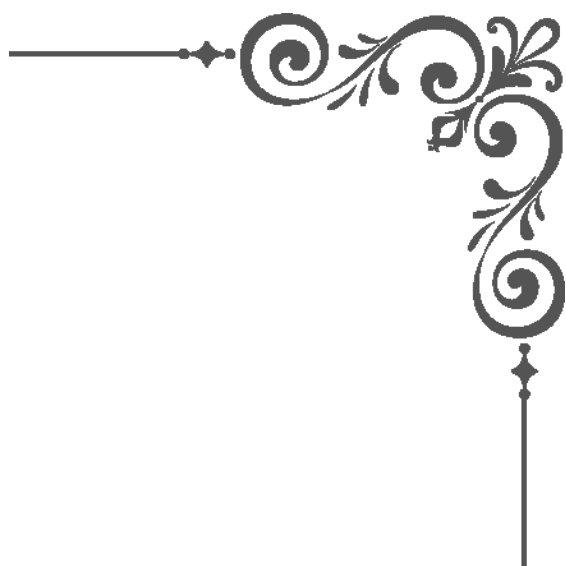
She read back through each of the letters, looking for anything that might clue her in to the identity of Harriet's beau. But there was nothing beyond the likely possibility that he resided in the same neighborhood. In one letter, he mentioned a time he caught a glimpse of Harriet walking with the young Dryden ladies, and though he wished to approach if only to see her smile, propriety wouldn't have allowed it.

Was he a servant in another nearby household perhaps?

Though she wanted desperately to believe Harriet and her young man had eloped, there were far too many questions and not enough evidence to prove Harriet was with the young man now. And if they had run off together, instead of sending such a cryptic note, why wouldn't Harriet simply have told Lark the truth? And then there was the maid who swore Harriet disappeared after being called down to the lord's party. And the fact that she'd left behind all of her belongings.

It didn't add up. There were too many holes and inconsistencies in the theory.

Frustrated, Lark secured the letters in the handkerchief. Opening a drawer in the desk, she tucked them away. Somehow those letters were the key to Harriet's fate. They *had* to be. She could feel it.



Chapter Fifteen

The next morning, the marquess requested breakfast along with his tea to be served in his study. A severe lack of sleep and relentless thoughts of Harriet made Lark feel sluggish and slow-witted, but she did her best not to show it as she set the tea tray on the table. “Shall I pour?”

There was a pregnant pause before he answered, which almost prompted an inquiring glance, but she kept her gaze trained forward.

“Please,” he finally replied, and Lark had to wonder if she’d imagined the deeper roughness in his voice.

“Is something wrong, Mrs. Evans? You appear unusually preoccupied this morning.”

Straightening her spine, Lark forced herself to meet his gaze. “Not at all, my lord.”

His crystalline gaze narrowed and a dark intensity flashed across his features. “I don’t believe you, madam. Something has you uncharacteristically distracted.”

Lark refused to say more. She likely wouldn’t have been able to anyway with how his gaze hardened to sharp points as he stared at her. She wasn’t exactly frightened by his intensity, nor even intimidated. But something fierce rushed through her as she stared back at him. Something like...anticipation mixed with desperate defiance.

Then, in the combative silence, his expression began to shift. So subtly, she nearly didn’t notice. But his eyes started to reflect a depth she hadn’t seen him display before.

When he finally spoke, his voice was low. “It was you last night. Wasn’t it?”

Alarm spiked through her blood, but she forced herself to scowl with gentle confusion. “What do you mean, my lord?”

“At Dryden’s.” This time, his tone held more confidence, as though her response had simply served to convince him further.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He sighed as he rose to his feet. Lark refused to step back. “Are you a thief, Mrs. Evans?”

She lifted her chin. “Not anymore.”

As he stared at her—studied her in the lengthening silence—his angled features hardened into a look that suggested frustration. “If

you're no thief, then what reason could you've possibly had to break into Lord Dryden's home?"

Lark held her tongue.

The marquess stepped forward. There was a dark shadow in his gaze and a harshness about his mouth as he stood in front of her. "Tell me. Why were you there?"

Lark took a heavy breath. Her belly twisted and her chest ached as the truth rose up through her throat. There were a thousand reasons for her not to trust this man. But everything inside her urged her to answer him honestly. Tipping her head back to meet his gaze, she replied, "I'm looking for a friend. She disappeared some weeks ago."

The only change in him was the bunching of muscles in his jaw as he stared at her. For a moment, she felt as though he saw right into the heart of her and understood far more than she'd revealed in her reply.

"Go on, Mrs. Evans."

Now that she'd exposed her true purpose, there seemed little reason to hide the rest. "She took a position as personal maid to Lord Dryden's three daughters nearly six months ago. Several weeks ago, I received a cryptic message from her. Begging my forgiveness." Lark paused to swallow past the hard lump in her throat. Meeting the marquess's glinting gaze, she added, "She urged me not to look for her and warned me to stay away from Curzon Street."

"So, of course, that's exactly where you went." Warfield's jaw tensed even more. "You snuck into Dryden's house seeking answers," he noted calmly. "Did you find any?"

After only a brief hesitation, she replied, "No."

Though she'd given up so many secrets already, some tenuous grip she still had on self-preservation and loyalty to her friend kept her from mentioning the letters.

"You play a very risky game on your friend's behalf. She must mean a great deal to you."

Lark considered saying nothing to that, but as Harriet's image arose in her mind, she suddenly didn't want to be the only person who thought of Harriet and worried about her. With a deep breath, she looked down at her clasped hands. "I found her on one of the coldest days in a frigid February. Trembling and half-starved, huddled behind a pile of refuse. She was so small, barely four or five years old by my estimate, but her story isn't so unusual, I'm afraid. Sold by her mother into work for a woman who didn't have the patience for such a young apprentice, she was eventually tossed out."

Lark lifted her gaze again and met the marquess's intent stare. "I could see right away that she'd not survive long on the streets. Not even with me as protector. She was too trusting. Too soft and sweet.

She was of no use to the gang and would've been just another mouth to feed. I was told to get rid of her, take her to another neighborhood and leave her."

She'd considered it. It would have been the right thing to do for the gang and the only family she'd ever known. But as she'd taken the small girl's hand and looked down into her trusting, soulful eyes, she hadn't been able to follow through.

"Every girl in the rookery knows about the Yeardley Asylum for Girls," she continued. "A formidable place that plucks hapless, destitute girls from the streets and reforms them into proper little servants for the upper classes. Though Harriet was younger than the age they typically accepted, they agreed to take her in if I committed to staying as well. Harriet flourished in the firm structure and discipline they provided and soon became their star pupil."

When she paused then, the marquess noted dryly, "Not so for you, I imagine."

"I did what was necessary. For Harriet. The rules were...many. And I was fourteen when I decided to leave the peril of the streets behind me. After the relative independence I'd known for so long, it took time to adjust. But there was a warm bed every night and two meals a day. True luxury by comparison to what I'd have been able to provide Harriet as a house thief, so I endured. Eventually, I earned a position in a reputable household."

"And worked your way to housekeeper," he added.

Lark nodded. "Harriet and I dreamed of saving enough money to eventually retire in a little cottage in a country village somewhere." When his brows lowered, she added, "Foolish, I know. Neither of us would have any idea what to do in the country, but it kept us motivated, I suppose."

"And hopeful."

Yes.

She didn't need to say it out loud. She knew he could read the truth in her face as she made no effort to hide how it felt to relive those dreams of a future that might never be. And oddly, she could see he understood.

But then his expression darkened once again. "You must immediately cease your investigations and promise you'll stay far away from Dryden House."

Lark replied just as firmly, "I'll cease nothing at all, my lord, until Harriet has been found and safely returned to me."

He stepped toward her, close enough that she could make out the sparks of silver in his gaze. "You've no idea what danger you're courting."

She thought of the meticulous notes stashed in the hidden box and

his own covert activities. "But you do," she replied carefully.

His eyes narrowed. "You're trying to go up against something more powerful than you can imagine. Decades of secrecy and unlimited wealth protect them. You're more likely to find yourself following your friend than rescuing her."

"Following her where, my lord? Do you know what happened to her?"

His mouth pressed together in a firm line that only accented the harshly sensual arches and curves. But he did not reply.

"If you know something, my lord, you have to tell me."

When he still said nothing, she stepped forward and looked into his eyes as she urged, "Please."

"I know nothing of your friend," he finally replied.

She couldn't let it go at that. "But you do know something."

His eyes flashed as the control he'd been exerting broke for a brief moment. He grasped her upper arms firmly in his hands and lowered his head toward hers to mutter through a clenched jaw, "Let it go, Mrs. Evans."

"I can't," she gasped.

His grip tightened. "You must. For your own safety."

"Don't you understand?" she whispered. "I don't care about my safety. I care only for finding Harriet."

Something bright flared in his eyes. A light so intense it stole her breath. But then he narrowed his gaze and cleared his throat. As though just realizing how he was holding her, he suddenly released her and took two steps back.

His voice was even but heavy when he spoke again. "You'd best return to your duties, Mrs. Evans."

Lark stared back at him. A thousand things tripped over her tongue for the right to be spoken. But she said none of them. Something in his manner finally convinced her she wouldn't get what she wanted from him this day. So, she straightened her spine and forced her features into a staid and neutral expression as she clasped her hands at her waist.

"You're allowing me to stay on as your housekeeper?"

He'd already turned away from her to reclaim his seat but paused to look over his shoulder at her question. "Have you stolen from me?"

"No, my lord."

"Do you intend to?"

"No."

"Then I expect you to do your duties as housekeeper. *Within* the walls of Warfield House." His warning was clear, but her relief was greater. Her position here was as vital as ever. Perhaps even more so now. "You may resume such duties by informing Cook that I'll be

taking dinner with my cousins at Northmoor House tonight.”

“Yes, my lord.”

He held her gaze. “No more midnight capers, Mrs. Evans. Vow it.”

She had no trouble lying if it’d keep her near Curzon Street. “I vow it.”

He gave a short nod, and she responded with a curtsy before turning to leave the room. The familiar rustle of his newspaper followed her through the door, as though he truly believed the matter had been settled that easily.



LATER THAT EVENING, instead of updating the household accounts, Lark decided to read through Harriet’s letters one more time. Perhaps a second time through might provide more insight.

Unfortunately, there was nothing more to be gleaned from the sweet messages than she had already. And her focus was continually interrupted by thoughts of the marquess and their discussion from that morning.

He knew something. She was convinced of it.

Maybe not specifically in regard to Harriet, but he hadn’t shown the least bit of surprise when she’d said her friend had gone missing. And there had been a hopeful note in his voice when he’d asked if she’d managed to find anything at the Drydens’ townhouse.

And of course, there were his own meticulous notes on the Drydens and other local gentlemen of distinction.

It was all linked. It had to be.

Warfield was obviously investigating these men, but to what purpose? Blackmail didn’t really fit considering Warfield was already wealthy beyond most.

The maid she’d spoken to had said Lord Dryden had been hosting a special party the night Harriet went missing. Could his guests have been the other men in Warfield’s notes? It made sense with the warning in Harriet’s letter.

Had the marquess been a guest?

Abruptly rising to her feet, she took long, pacing strides to the fireplace, then to the nook containing her bed, then back to the desk.

If he had been at Dryden’s party that night, she didn’t believe he could have done anything to harm her friend. She’d learned long ago to rely on her gut instincts when it came to determining a person’s character. And though the marquess was broody and most often displayed a cold, icy demeanor, at his core, he was a noble and honorable man. He could never be the monster his father had apparently been.

His father.

Lark froze in place as she recalled the notebook containing the prior marquess's drafted memoir. The very little bit she'd read had been burned indelibly into her mind. He was certainly the type of man who'd think nothing of assaulting a young maid. And though he'd long been away from England at the time of Harriet's disappearance, he had lived in this very house at one time. He was of an age with Lord Dryden and was very likely a mutual acquaintance of the other neighboring gentlemen.

Her eyes widened as she recalled a word that had struck her as odd when she'd skimmed over it in the notebook but had quickly forgotten it as she'd read on.

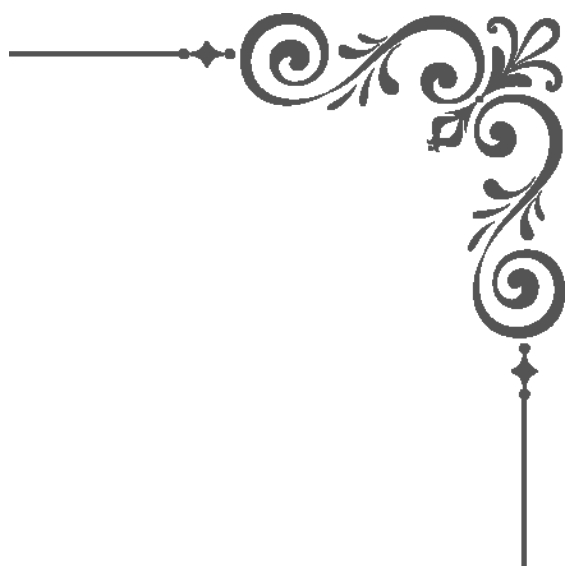
Brotherhood.

If her memory served, the prior marquess had used it in reference to a particular group of friends. The men of Curzon Street?

Had she been too hasty in disregarding the memoir as the lascivious ramblings of a depraved sadist?

She needed to read those notes more carefully.

Glancing to the clock, she noted the time. The marquess had no doubt already gone to his cousins' for dinner and should be away for another couple hours. Plenty of time.



Chapter Sixteen

As the hour drew near, Alastair dressed in evening finery appropriate for dinner with a duke, he called his carriage and left the house in his usual manner.

But he did not go to Northmoor House. Instead, he had the carriage continue for only a few blocks before circling back around to drop him at the end of the mews. From there, he made his way unseen to the old stable building, where he accessed the hidden tunnel. Within less than ten minutes, he was back inside his house.

Swiftly and silently, he traversed the narrow corridor, went up the spiral stairway, until he reached the panel that would open to his bedroom.

Only then did he stop. And wait.

Despite her vow, he had no doubt his intrepid housekeeper would stray back into the night at her earliest opportunity to continue whatever investigation she believed necessary. But tonight, he'd given her another opportunity. One he suspected she wouldn't be able to resist.

He barely heard the click of his bedroom door. It was so quiet he could have easily passed it off for nothing if he weren't so attuned to every sound as he awaited the arrival of a former thief.

Even still, when silence followed, he questioned whether he'd mistaken the sound.

Slowing his breath, he extended his senses into the room beyond the closed panel. Though he stood in complete darkness, he closed his eyes. Listening, breathing in the dank air of the narrow passage, seeking a shift to indicate she was near.

There it was. The gentlest breath.

He considered revealing himself then, confronting her, demanding she cease her sleuthing. But instinct again urged him to patience.

He should be furious at the intrusion. He wasn't. He'd suspected from their first meeting that there was something going on behind the woman's gray eyes. Secrets and deception seemed as much a part of her as her staid focus and forced propriety. Now that he knew what motivated her, he couldn't fault such loyalty, even if her means were questionable.

Weren't his own?

If she'd ever suspected him for a moment of being involved in her

friend's disappearance, she'd surely have searched his room. And if anyone could have discovered the secret passage, he believed it was her. Which meant she'd also read his notes. And possibly his father's ramblings.

Though he heard no movement, somehow, he knew she was coming closer. Then he detected the softest brush of fingertips along marble.

She was at the fireplace. A step away from where he stood concealed.

A gentle snick broke the breathless silence. The panel in front of him sprung open a small crack. Just enough for slim fingers to reach into the space and silently draw it open.

Alastair caught a split-second impression of her pretty features widening with surprise before he reached for her, pulled her into the passage with him, and closed the panel.

Utter darkness enclosed them.

The scent of her—flowers and amber—chased away the smell of wood and dust and shadow. Her heavy skirts brushed his boots before forming gently about his legs. One of her hands had grasped firmly to his forearm to keep her balance as he spun her into the passage and remained there still, while his hand rested in the gentle curve of her low back.

Standing sideways in the passage, there was just barely enough room for both of them. His back was pressed flush to the wall as hers likely was as well. Yet their bodies met with every breath. Hers, short and shallow in her momentary shock. His, long and deep as he contemplated his next move.

He'd fully expected her to come to his rooms while he was out, but he hadn't exactly planned what he'd do once she did. Drawing her into the darkness had been an impulse. A dangerous one, he admitted as his body began to warm at her proximity and his senses filled with the details of her.

The way they stood—facing each other, holding on to each other—felt like an embrace. Intimate. Intentional.

Keeping his voice to a low murmur appropriate to their location, he noted darkly, "I wish I could say I'm surprised to find you here, Mrs. Evans."

"I might say the same," she whispered back, her voice slightly breathless despite the hint of censure in her tone. "You're not supposed to be here."

Was she annoyed that he'd tricked her into revealing herself?

He allowed a smile, knowing she couldn't see it. "It is my house after all. What exactly are you doing in my private rooms?"

"Looking for answers," she replied with stubborn elusiveness.

“To what questions?” He could be stubborn as well.

There was a lengthy pause before she finally replied in a low voice that blended perfectly with the darkened atmosphere around them.

“Questions to your nature, my lord.”

Alastair stiffened. “My nature is none of your concern.”

“But it is,” she argued. “You’re shrouded in secrets and shadow. And it’s clear you prefer it that way. What are you so desperate to hide?”

Against his better judgment, he lowered his head toward hers, close enough to feel her breath fanning gently across his jaw. “Things you’re far better off never, ever discovering.”

She didn’t reply. Long enough for him to feel her take two steadying breaths. Long enough to note a shift in her stance, a slight softening of her spine. Then a heavy murmur. “And you’d be better off not underestimating me. I’m not easily frightened.”

A deep thrill rolled through him as her words conjured things in his mind that he’d fought for weeks to keep dormant. Thoughts of pulling her closer despite their already too close position. A desire to slide his hand up her spine to her nape. A need to feel her warm, sweet breath bathing his lips...her tongue seeking his...

“I’ve read your notes. About Dryden and his friends,” she stated. “You’ve been observing them. Learning their habits, studying their homes. Why?”

Her words pulled him from his pleasurable imaginings to find that her spine was tense beneath his hand and that her fingers had curled into the material of his coat sleeve. She was determined. And fearless. And passionate in her pursuit of truths that might be better off unknown.

He clenched his jaw as he realized just how badly he wanted to give her the answers she craved. He wanted to help her. But he couldn’t allow her to get any deeper into this mess than she was already. If someone else had happened to come upon her at Dryden’s or anywhere else she’d probably been snooping about, her life would be forfeit. But likely not until after they’d used her for their entertainment.

“I think I know what you’re trying to do. Although I’ve decided to believe your declaration that you know nothing of Harriet specifically, I also believe you know far more than you’ve admitted. There is more going on with Dryden and his friends than one missing maid, isn’t there?”

When he said nothing, she continued urgently, her voice heavy with desperation, “Don’t you understand? I *must* find out what happened.”

With a low sound of frustration, he grasped her shoulders in his

hands and harshly provided the truth she needed to hear. "You're right. Your friend is not the first housemaid to go missing, but you've no idea what you're up against. These men have a combined wealth and power beyond your imagining. They command the authorities like marionettes. Their influence reaches all the way to the palace, and they've proven themselves willing to go to extensive lengths to protect their security and their secrecy. They're untouchable and very, very dangerous. Especially to someone like you."

"Someone like me?" she asked sharply.

Alastair clenched his jaw. He'd said far too much. Revealed too much.

"You mean a woman with limited means, no family, no one to question if I were to suddenly disappear?"

He didn't want to acknowledge that was exactly what he meant. But the truth was the brotherhood intentionally preyed upon women of less fortunate circumstances.

Rather than being dissuaded by his warning, she sounded angry as she replied, "You think I don't know the place I hold in this world? It was made clear the day I was abandoned on a bloody doorstep. I'm dispensable. Forgettable."

"You're not."

"Of course I am. But it doesn't matter—"

His hands tightened on her shoulders. He hated the self-critical tone in her voice. It was clear that she fully believed what she said.

He knew what it was to go through life believing your existence didn't matter, or worse, that it was an abomination. He simply couldn't allow her to believe such nonsense for another moment.

"If that were the slightest bit true," he noted thickly, "you wouldn't have gone to the lengths you have to find your friend. You'd never have discovered this passage." He lowered his head to add the greatest truth of all. "And you wouldn't haunt my thoughts as you do. I wouldn't...feel so much the moment you enter a room."

Though his words had dropped to a low, barely audible whisper, the silence that followed his confession was perfectly deafening.

He shouldn't have said it. Shouldn't have admitted so much.

It was shockingly inappropriate. He was her employer. Her position in his household made her vulnerable. And saying what he just did...dammit, he was no better than his sire.

With a rough sound, he released her and straightened, pressing back against the wall. Trying to give her space to flee as she no doubt would. As she *should*.

Frustrated with himself and his lack of restraint, it took him a moment to realize she hadn't moved.

Alastair peered down at her through the darkness. His sight had

adjusted enough to see only the bare outline of her form. He couldn't tell as she looked up at him if her expression was one of fear, disgust, or anger.

"What do you feel when I walk in the room?" she whispered.

Alastair's body tensed painfully as he clenched his teeth.

Why would she ask that?

He couldn't tell her the faintest whiff of her scent made him ache. That the direct focus of her gaze felt like a jolt of lightning coursing through him. That her voice warmed him. Her movements bewitched him. Her steadiness terrified him.

"Tell me, my lord." Her voice was raw silk as her breath slipped softly along his jaw and her body seemed to come subtly nearer though he couldn't be sure she moved. His entire body hardened. Flames licked along his nerves. "In this dark place, just between the two of us...tell me what you feel."

A sudden, fierce tingling rush of need claimed him. A soul-deep acknowledgement of her words. Everything in him clamored to draw her body into his, to claim her words with his mouth.

He couldn't tell her what he was feeling.

He'd show her instead.

He brought his arms roughly around her slim form, drawing her flush against him. His mouth found hers so easily. And as soon as he felt the lush, silky texture of her lips, any possible resistance he might have possessed simply melted into nothing. Dispersed in a heated mist. Tilting his head, he parted his lips to better taste the forbidden sweetness of her mouth.

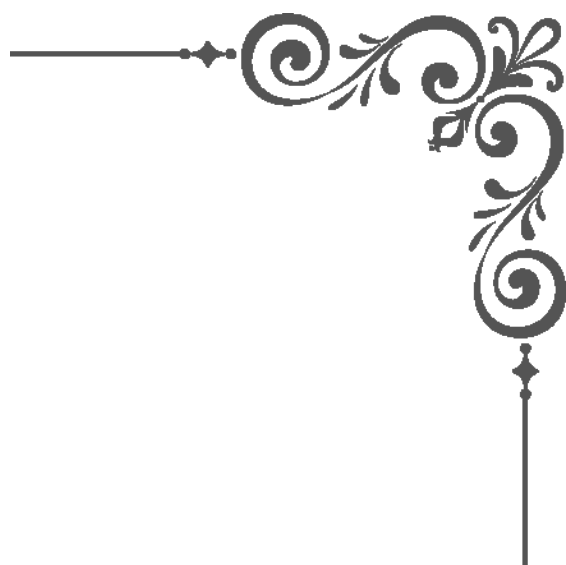
Her lips opened with a sigh, and he claimed her next sighing breath with a plunging stroke of his tongue. Her moan—a soft, needful sound—twisted through his core. Igniting him. Enflaming him.

It felt so damned right. But it was so blasted wrong.

His hands flexed in preparation to set her away from him, to break the kiss, to end the torment of relishing something he couldn't, shouldn't have.

But just when he thought he'd gathered the strength needed to end the embrace, her hands slid to his shoulders, then curled around his neck. As though she sensed his intention and swiftly countered it.

Maybe he could give in. Just a little. Just for a few stolen moments in this secret world where nothing existed but the two of them.



Chapter Seventeen

Lark's entire body was poised to fight. An odd feeling to have while being kissed as though life existed solely in their breath and the movement of their mouths.

But the second she made up her mind to embrace the dark, insistent yearning inside her, to claim the possibility that he wanted her just as badly, she knew she wasn't going to allow this opportunity to end without feeling every bit of what she longed for each night as she lay alone in her bed.

Though he'd taken her mouth with an assurance and mastery that thrilled her, she could feel the contradiction in him. The resistance and the self-denial.

And she felt confident she knew the reason for it. So, when she sensed him preparing to end the deliciously erotic play of his lips and tongue, she had to communicate her desire in the only way she could. By holding him tighter, pulling him closer. Refusing to be set away.

Not yet. Please not yet, her body pleaded.

And he listened.

Bringing a hand up in the tight space between them, he curled it against the side of her throat and pressed a broad thumb beneath her chin, tilting her head back as he plunged his tongue possessively past her teeth, twirling it with hers before retreating. Then, with ravenous hunger, he set his open mouth to her neck, teasing a heated path down to the pulse beating rapidly in the hollow of her collarbone.

Wonderful sensations flew through her body. Feelings of amazement, wanting, the greatest need for a kind of physical intimacy she'd never experienced before—never wanted before.

When he shifted his hold again, she couldn't stop the faint sound of protest from catching in her throat. But he didn't move to set her away. Instead, he kept her close in the circle of his arms as he turned her around to face away from him. With his hand still beneath her chin, he eased her head back against his shoulder so he could continue to explore the silky softness of her neck while his other hand splayed against her belly, holding her buttocks nestled warmly to his groin.

Her breath became stilted, and her head spun wildly with a wave of overwhelming, unprecedented desire.

With one hand, she reached down and back. Finding the hard column of his thigh, she curled her fingers against his muscled flesh,

holding him to her. Her other hand reached forward to brace flat against the wall in front of her. Her lungs expanded with a deep breath that released on a heavy sigh.

She felt exposed—her body accessible to his touch, his every exploration, her heart open to the darkness around them. But she also felt more confident and secure against his large form than she had in her life. She felt wanted and protected. New experiences, both.

The play of his mouth at her throat sent thought-erasing tingles through her body, melting her spine as she began to move gently against him, just a soft shifting, a seeking. She needed something more in the connection between their bodies than simply being held.

With a hard and heavy moan, he tipped her head back and angled it toward him so he could settle his mouth on hers once again.

Yes. This.

Her tongue darted forward first. Demanding the dark, heady taste of him. As their mouths mated, furiously, ravenously, his hand slid down the column of her throat to catch at the high neck of her gown. With a sigh and a barely suppressed whimper, she realized he was releasing the long row of buttons that ran down the front of her gown.

Impatient and impulsive, she arched her spine and was immediately rewarded by the heavy pressure of his large hand at her low belly, the undeniable hardness of him cradled against her buttocks, and the sudden waft of air across her collarbone.

The low murmur of his voice against her lips soothed her though she had no idea what he said.

And then his fingers were curling around the gaping neckline of her gown as he slowly tugged it past the slope of her shoulder, baring a breast only thinly covered by her chemise.

With a growl of animalistic hunger that echoed hauntingly in the narrow corridor, he covered her aching breast with his hand. His fingers molded her shape as his tongue delved hotly into her mouth.

She could do nothing but revel in the pleasure of his forceful embrace, his expert hands, his rich, ravenous kisses as she found herself unexpectedly grateful that he wasn't the type of man to offer gentle pecks or tentative caresses. She was shocked to discover how badly she'd needed to be so completely claimed by him. How she'd been longing for exactly this...this physical domination. This utter possession.

As she gasped and moaned against his lips, he shifted the hand he held to her abdomen, sliding it lower until he delved between her thighs. When his hand covered that hollow aching place with covetous strength, her legs weakened and her body shook. Though the layers of her skirts separated her sensitive flesh from his bare touch, the pressure was lovely and rich and illuminating. She pulsed and ached

for more.

And when his finger expertly circled the budding crest of her breast as his mouth slid to the sensitive shell of her ear, she thought she might expire from the wild swirling of sensation through her body.

"I'm a wicked cad to be enjoying this so much," he muttered thickly against her ear. "I know it, but I can't keep myself from wanting more."

His fingers shifted against her core, sending a jolt of pleasure through her.

Lark turned her head to catch his lips. "Am I wicked, as well?" she gasped. "For needing it as I do?"

"You're flawless," he murmured.

"If only...that were true."

He covered her breast again, shaping it to his liking as he began a lovely rhythmic stroke between her thighs. "Then we'll be wicked together."

She nearly broke. Her body tightening, arching, shaking in his arms.

But then—

A sound.

Quiet. Close. Undeniable.

They both stilled instantly. It took every minute ounce of Lark's willpower to keep herself silent and unmoving in the marquess's embrace. While her body remained ignited in flames. While her core thrummed. While her breath felt trapped and heavy in her lungs. While she clamped her teeth hard over her bottom lip and squeezed her eyes tightly closed.

She could feel a similar tension in the man behind her. In the sudden straightening of his stance, in the iron-bound security of his arms, and the assurance in his hands, still gripping her so intimately.

As the maid continued to move about the bedroom, a tear of frustration slipped from her eye to slide silently over the curve of her cheek to her chin before it fell.

The marquess lifted his hand from her breast, and it took all she had not to utter a protest. But then she felt the gentle brush of his knuckles across her cheek.

In an instant, she felt him withdraw.

Not physically, since he continued to hold her. But in every other way. It felt as though a cold draft swept through the passage, chilling her heated skin as the flames he'd ignited in her body were blown away.

As soon as the maid finished stoking the fire and Lark heard the soft click of the bedroom door as the girl left the room, Lark eased

away from the marquess. Lowering her chin, she started on the buttons of her dress.

Though she was no longer pressed flush against him, feeling every plane and contour of his chest and belly and thighs, she was still close enough to feel him stiffen as his hands dropped away from her. His voice sounded strained in the dark. "Allow me to help."

"It's all right," she whispered. "I've got it."

She would, anyway, if her fingers would just stop trembling. And she'd stop trembling if she could manage to stop thinking about how his mouth tasted, sinful and erotic, or how his hands felt, strong and masterful.

As she stood there, trying to put her thoughts together over the deafening sound of her racing heart, the man who'd claimed her body and her senses as his own shifted subtly in the dark.

Uncertain in a way she'd never before experienced, she didn't lift her head from her task.

"Return the way you came," he muttered heavily. "And don't access this passage ever again."

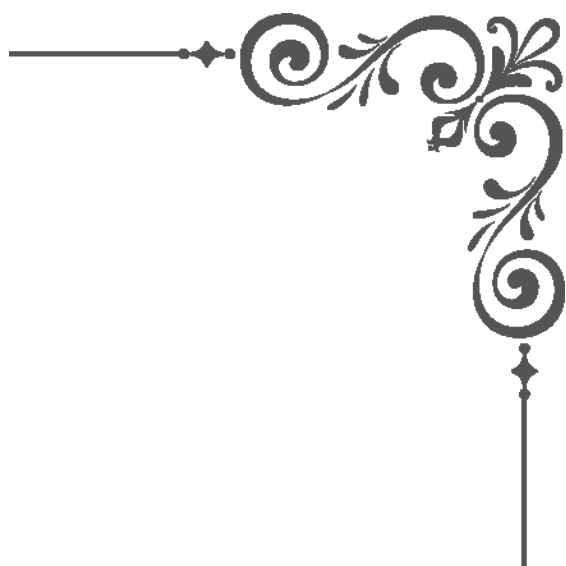
His movement disturbed the fall of her skirts and stirred the air around her, causing the heady scent of sandalwood to swirl through her awareness before he left her. Looking up then, she caught only the faintest outline of his form before it disappeared into the darkness of the passage.

Waiting until she was confident that she was alone, she took several deep breaths. Then she checked the details of her appearance with careful hands, straightening her bodice and setting her lace cap back into proper position. A few strands of hair had loosened from her pins, but there wasn't much she could do about that.

Another deep breath, a final check of her buttons, then she reached for the hidden latch.

The panel shifted to show a small crack of light from the room beyond, and she pushed it the rest of the way open. Blinking into the brightness, she stepped forward. But then suddenly remembered why she'd come here in the first place. Turning back, she flipped open the lid of the box still tucked into the corner.

But it was empty.



Chapter Eighteen

Alastair had no destination in mind when he left her in the darkness behind him. He just needed to get away from her. From the temptation of her. The warmth and softness and unrestrained acceptance.

And from his own guilt and shame.

But no matter how long he walked the streets of Mayfair, he couldn't get the taste of her off his lips nor could he forget how she'd felt in his arms. It was everything he'd imagined and coveted from the moment she'd turned her gaze upon him. No walk had the power to dispel the way those stolen moments in the darkness with her had changed him. From the inside out. He'd never be the same again.

But the pleasure of being with her couldn't overcome the truth. A truth that had become starkly apparent when her tear fell on his hand as it covered her breast.

He was a cad. His father's son.

And he hated himself for it.

When he finally found his way back to the house, he did not go through the secret tunnel. Instead, he approached through the garden so he could see if a light was still on in the housekeeper's rooms. Apparently, he hadn't tortured himself enough yet this night. But all was dark, as it should have been at such a late hour. Unsurprisingly, it was disappointment rather than relief he felt as he continued into the house, along the quiet hallway, and up the stairs to his bedroom.

What would he have done if there'd been a light in her window? Knocked on her door? Apologized? Taken her in his arms to kiss her breathless?

When he entered his bedchamber and saw his housekeeper sitting quietly in the chair by the fire, the harsh groan rising from his chest died in his throat. She was staring at the door, her focus intent and steady. Waiting for his return.

He almost turned on his heel and left her there. To go back out into the night. To keep walking until the distance behind him exceeded the pull to return. But he'd been doing that from the day he'd left this mother's house. There was no place far enough to escape the truth.

He said nothing as he walked across the room to his valet stand. Typically, his first task would be to stoke the fire, but she'd kept it

healthy in his absence. Besides, the task would have brought him nearer to her. With his back to the room, he removed his coat and loosened his cravat. After unwinding the neckcloth, he took the time to fold it then set it aside. The movements were automatic and required no thought, allowing his mental focus to remain on the silent woman who hadn't yet moved from her place.

He wanted to look at her. But he wasn't ready for what he'd see in her eyes.

Why was she here?

She should have gone straight to her room after he'd left her. Where she could lock her door against him.

"Tell me about your mother."

Her words surprised him. The calm steadiness of her tone as well as the request itself.

The muscles along his spine ached with tension and resistance as Alastair's hands curled into fists. Unable to turn and face her, he shifted his gaze to look out the window. There were no stars and the clouds made it impossible to find the moon.

Was there a reason not to tell her? If she'd read his notes, then she'd also likely read his father's memoir, which meant she knew the full truth of his sire. His mother's story was far more tragic, but there was little reason to keep it all from her now.

"Her name was Moira Cullen," he began simply, speaking toward the darkness outside. "A sixteen-year-old girl who'd come to London with aspirations of earning enough money to support herself and her large family back in Galway. She'd thought herself fortunate to be hired on so quickly by such a prestigious household. A dream that became a nightmare." He couldn't keep the hard edge from his voice as he spoke. There was no tenderness in this story. No happy ending. He angled his head to glance over his shoulder. "You read his notes?"

There was a pause. "Only very briefly."

He made a rough sound. "Couldn't bear to read more? I suppose you can imagine what he did to her. He held her captive for weeks. Raping and humiliating her for the entertainment of his noble friends."

He didn't hear the woman come up beside him, but he felt her presence. Warmth. Steadiness. Calm strength. She'd told him earlier not to underestimate her. He doubted he could. She was the very embodiment of courage and constancy.

Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to finish. His words came out sounding sharp and utterly unfeeling despite the way they tore painfully through his throat. "When she discovered she was with child...she attempted to end her life. The prior marquess, however, had decided he was ready for an heir, and he didn't particularly care

where he got one. He forced her to the altar then sent her to a frozen manor in the north of Scotland. Away from anyone she might call friend, cutting all ties to family, guarded day and night to ensure she remained alive long enough to give birth. She survived, but the experience changed her. Her mind...certainly, and her heart had been altered. Hardened. Every time someone called her *countess* or addressed her as *my lady*, the screws twisted more tightly. She hated every reminder of what she'd endured. Me, especially."

He paused. Thinking back to those dark years in the cold and snow of a guarded old castle. "When I was very young, I didn't understand her hatred. Why she'd look at me with such pain and revulsion. I learned to stay out of sight as much as possible. But eventually, I started to suspect what had happened to her from the accusations and damning curses she hurled at me over the years. I considered running away, if only to give her some peace. But I think a part of me hoped she'd come to see me differently. Separate from my father."

The woman beside him stepped closer but didn't touch him and didn't say anything. He kept his gaze on the sky, thoughtlessly searching for the moon.

"The marquess visited only once when I was very young, but the violence his appearance unleashed within my mother kept him from ever returning. He did his duty, however. Ensuring I had the proper education, manners, and so forth to inherit his place in the world. When I was old enough to go away to school, she started doing better. Her outbursts became less frequent, and she developed a friendship with one the maids who cared for her."

He took a heavy breath. "I went back only once. She mistook me for him. The look in her eyes is one I'll never forget. I did not return again."

"Where did you go?"

He shrugged. "Everywhere and nowhere. Places that allowed me to disappear in a crowd and places so desolate I was the only person around for days. I traveled for several years over multiple continents until a day, just over a year ago, when I received notice of my mother's passing. A peaceful death, I understand. When I returned to my childhood home, I discovered the hundreds of letters she'd written to her family over the years. Written but had been forbidden to send. Letters that described in painful detail the torment she endured at the hands of an evil lord and his malevolent friends."

"That must've been difficult."

Though he'd read them only once, the content of those letters would remain with him always. The anguished outpourings of a girl who'd discovered monsters were real and heroes didn't exist. A young woman tortured by a fate she had no hope of escaping but through

death.

Yes, it had been difficult. But also, a relief.

"I finally understood the source of her hatred of me." He cleared the emotion from his throat. "I'd never had a desire to know the man who'd sired me, but when I learned the full truth of what he'd done, I had to confront him. I found him in Venice, where he'd been living since his exile from England for some scandal he couldn't completely sweep away." His hands clenched into fists. "He'd laughed at my outrage. Told me I'd understand one day when I discovered the true pleasures of life as he had."

It was difficult to keep his fury in check as he recalled that brief interview. How he'd hated seeing the resemblance between them. How he'd so badly wanted to erase the smirk from the old man's face. He'd never wanted to set eyes on him again.

"He died that night. I suspect he was killed by one of his old friends who no longer had a use for him. And all that was his passed to me. I intended to forsake every bit of the damned inheritance. But then I found his little book of notes. His *memoir*. And I realized walking away from it all wouldn't be enough. I had to destroy it and the legacy of torment that came with it."

His vow faded into the silence. And though he felt her there, steady and calm at his side, he kept his gaze trained forward.

She knew all of it now.

His stomach churned with old shame and disgust. Would she look at him now and see the horrors of his sire's crimes? As his mother had done? Would he see the same revulsion in her eyes that he'd grown so accustomed to as a child?

"You will destroy it," she finally said, her words strong and clear after having been held back throughout his explanation. "And I'm going to help you."

With a heavy sigh and low curse, Alastair combed his fingers back through his hair. Turning away from her, he strode to the fire, where he crouched to add wood. Needing the added warmth to chase the chill from his soul.

"You're going to do nothing." He looked over his shoulder at her with a forbidding scowl. "You're going to stay safely inside this house."

"I'm not." Her chin lifted defiantly. "That's not what I came here for."

Cursing under his breath, he straightened and crossed the room again to stand in front of her. His tone was harsh and angry with the need to make her understand. "Yes, I know. You came to find your friend. And I promise, I'll do everything in my power to uncover her fate. But you might have to accept that she's gone. These men have

murdered to protect their secrets and they'll do so again."

Her eyes flashed with wrathful conviction. "Harriet isn't dead. I cannot believe that. I *will* not. She's hiding. Or perhaps she was sent away as your mother was. I *will* find her. And I *will* help you bring these monsters to justice."

He growled in frustration. "What will it take to convince you there's nothing you can do except put yourself at risk?"

Determination chased across her features. "A worthy risk if it can help keep other women from your mother's fate."

His stomach clenched as he narrowed his gaze to harshly scan her fine features. She possessed so much courage and fury and passion. But none of that would save her if she caught the attention of men who'd proven themselves willing to do anything for their pleasures and their secrets.

"My lord," she continued, "I've spent my entire life looking over my shoulder, listening intently while walking down darkened alleys and unlit hallways, ever aware of the dangers that can befall a woman alone. These perils exist for all women of all classes and circumstances, but I know well the risks female servants face in order to earn their living. Stories like your mother's are horrendously common. If I can do something to prevent even a handful of such injustices, I must."

Her words rang with truth and conviction, but the need to protect her overwhelmed him. To hold her and keep her from the evils beyond these walls despite the strength of her courage. Or perhaps because of it. Unable to stop himself, he slowly slipped one arm around her back and pulled her close. As she tipped her head back, he lifted his other hand to the side of her face and brushed his thumb over the softness of her cheek.

She blinked and her lips parted softly but she didn't try to pull away. In fact, she seemed to soften against him. The curves of her body pressed intimately to his hard frame. Her hands curled around the muscles of his upper arms as she looked up at him with expectation in her eyes.

He held her gaze as he lowered his head to breathe in her scent—rich, feminine, lovely. Then he allowed his focus to slide over the pert tilt of her nose, then the sweet arch of her parted lips to the determined curve of her jaw.

He suspected that if he kissed her now, she'd welcome it with a sigh. And he'd breathe her in, and the strength and sweetness of her would wash away the dark stain he carried.

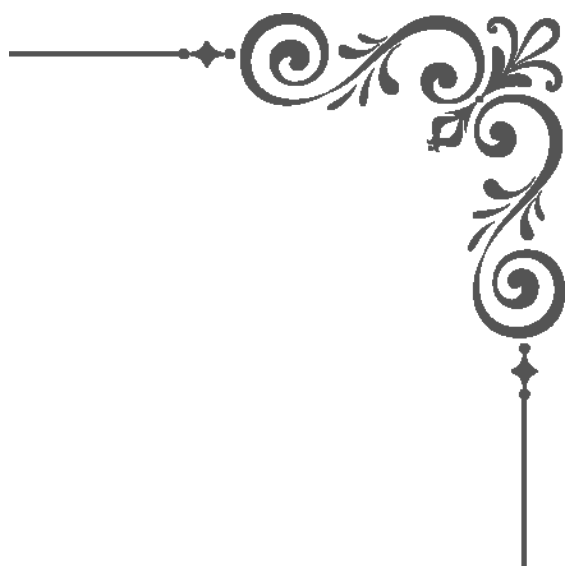
Holding her felt too right. Too calming and fulfilling. Too *good*. Knowing that gave him the strength to release her and walk away. He needed the anger and the revulsion. The darkness and

desperation. Maybe someday he could allow himself something different. But not today. Not until the evil had been cleared from the night and the moon shone bright again.

His voice was heavy as he spoke. "I inherited more than this house from my sire. His sins have become mine to bear while my mother's shame and agony run thick through my veins. I cannot be free until I've atoned for his actions and avenged her."

"I can help you," she urged once again, her voice coming from the shadows behind him.

He forced himself to stare fiercely into the fire. "Go to bed, Mrs. Evans. The hour is late."



Chapter Nineteen

The next morning, Alastair sent a note to the address provided by Dell Turner. Luckily, he didn't have to wait long before he received a reply, and only a few hours later, Turner joined him in the study, where they settled in to conduct their business with the ominous portrait of the prior marquess sneering down at them.

Turner claimed the chair directly opposite from Alastair, and though he took up a casual posture, there was self-awareness in his gaze and a quiet intensity in his expression as he returned Alastair's stare.

"I want this blasted business resolved," Alastair stated without preamble. "For good. As soon as bloody possible."

Turner gave him a curious look. "Why the sudden urgency?"

"It doesn't matter." He wasn't about to explain that his housekeeper was determined to put herself at risk in search of answers. Since he doubted he'd be able to stop her, he needed to eliminate the danger instead. "Have you gleaned anything useful from my notes, Mr. Turner?"

"I have." Reaching into the pocket of his coat, the other man pulled out a folded slip of paper and extended it toward Alastair. "There are a few details I still have to confirm, but I'm confident this is a complete list of the men who are or have been involved in the brotherhood."

Alastair unfolded the paper and skimmed the list. Twelve names. Thirteen when you counted Lowndes the younger separate from his father. Also included were Lord Shelbourne, noted as recently deceased. Lord Dryden. The Earl of Altham. Lord Hazelton. Lord Buckley, whom Alastair had just met the other night. The Duke of Chesterfield. And Lord Marlowe. The prior Marquess of Warfield was also listed as deceased, as was a Lord Whitney and a Baron Hunt.

He experienced a rush of frustration at knowing there were two more men who had died without facing justice.

The last man listed was a Sir John Lanham. The name was unfamiliar.

Under each name was an itemization of estates, business ventures and other crucial assets, closest family members, and their current addresses. Turner had gotten all this in a couple days?

Looking over the paper to meet the gaze of the man seated across

from him, he asked, "You're confident in the accuracy of this information?"

"With the exception of a few details, as I mentioned."

"It was procured rather quickly."

Now the man's lips tilted slightly. "I'm good at what I do."

A brotherhood of twelve, reduced to eight still living.

Alastair made a short sound before returning his attention to the list. "Tell me about this last man, Sir Lanham. I haven't seen any of him at the gatherings I've attended and never heard his name spoken."

"Sir Lanham resides in a drafty castle on the coast. From all accounts, he is on his deathbed. Syphilis. He likely won't live out the year."

Satisfaction rolled through Alastair at the poetic justice of such an end. He took a long breath before draining the last of his brandy.

Eight, soon to be seven.

The names had been penned with ink, but as far as he was concerned, they'd been written in blood. Though he hated knowing some of them had escaped proper justice for their evil, a flicker of hope filtered through the obsessive resolve that had been fueling him since he'd discovered the full truth of his ignoble inheritance.

"The Viscount Marlowe is hosting a private card game at his club tomorrow evening. By the end of the night, I intend to have an invitation for this mysterious upcoming event."

Turner gave a short nod. "If there's any way to discover where it's taking place ahead of time, I can have people in place that evening in case they're needed."

"I will certainly do what I can. Did Mrs. Turner have any luck in speaking with the courtesan?"

"I'm afraid not. Though the woman was willing to talk, her information was based on rumor and speculation. Tales told secondhand. Warnings in the dark. Nothing tangible."

Alastair got the sense Turner was holding something back. "Anything intangible?"

The other man's expression didn't change but he didn't reply for a long moment. Then he seemed to make his mind up about something and replied with cautious care. "Keep in mind that none of this has been confirmed and cannot be without a better source. Also, by your own investigations, these lords do not typically prey upon high-end ladies of the night. Women who are socially connected with some means and money of their own."

Alastair frowned. "That's true. So, the warnings of the courtesan are irrelevant?"

"Not necessarily. These types of cautionary tales tend to originate from some real danger. The trick is in tracing the rumors back to their

source so we can determine what, if any, truth exists.”

“That will take time.”

“It will,” Turner agreed. “But I’ve connections throughout the city and ways of obtaining records of private property sales and the like. If there’s a trail to follow, I’ll find it. We’ll be looking for a place that can be carefully guarded, in an area where the neighbors aren’t likely to question the sights and sounds of their activities.”

“That’s rather broad criteria.”

“We’ll narrow it down, my lord. Though if they happen to give you an address and specific directions on how to find it, it’d certainly be easier,” he said with a twist of wry humor. Then he took a breath as he glanced to the clock. “I’m afraid I must be going.”

Both men rose to their feet. Stiffly, Alastair extended his hand. “I appreciate your help in this, Turner.”

The other man nodded. “You should know I’m providing Hale with regular reports on my progress in this matter.”

Alastair scowled but nodded. “As long as he doesn’t intend to interfere.”

Turner’s brows lifted. “I can’t promise that, my lord. There’s not much stopping Mason Hale if he’s of a mind to involve himself.”

“So I’m learning,” Alastair replied with a rough sigh.



LARK WAS CROSSING THE entry hall when the door to the study suddenly opened and the marquess walked through.

Though her pride was still tender from the way he’d so coolly dismissed her from his room last night, she couldn’t keep herself from looking at him and searching his features to see if he was all right. Something in the hard determination of his final words had worried her. And his expression now did little to reassure her.

Hard and intent, his gaze tracked her as she passed through the hall. The intensity of his scowl stole her breath, and the sudden skip in her heart nearly tripped her step. Because what she’d always believed to be cold disdain now looked a hell of a lot like pure heat and fierce denial.

Despite the tension in her chest, she reminded herself that he’d rejected her. He’d pushed her away last night when she’d offered to help him. Giving a subtle lift of her chin, she intentionally shifted her gaze to the man who followed him from the study.

And nearly bit her tongue off as she suddenly found herself looking into the face of someone she hadn’t seen since she’d been a child. But there was no mistaking those canny hazel eyes, and though his features had certainly grown more mature in the years since she’d last beheld them, they retained enough resemblance as to leave her with

no doubt as to his identity.

Dell Turner had been a wily boy a few years older than Lark who'd hired himself out for a variety of tasks about town. Once her talent for getting into even the most secured locations had started to spread, he'd requested her assistance for a few mysterious jobs. She'd always liked him for his pragmatic and intuitive nature and had admired his desire to remain a loner when most street children took advantage of the securities a gang could provide. The jobs she'd done for him had paid well, and he'd been one of the few people on the East End she'd ever fully trusted and considered calling a friend. But she hadn't seen him since the day she and Harriet had knocked on the door of Yeardley's Asylum.

The presence of Mason Hale at the Marquess of Warfield's home had surprised her, but Dell Turner's presence shocked and confused her.

As though sensing her attention, Turner slowed his stride and glanced her way.

It had been more than a decade since she'd last seen him, so she didn't expect him to recognize her. But his eyes narrowed just a bit before he lowered his chin in a brief and subtle acknowledgment.

Lark nodded in return. The exchange occupied barely a moment as she passed, yet when she looked over her shoulder toward the marquess, she found him staring rather fiercely at Turner.

A tingling shiver coursed down her spine.

It was clear Warfield had seen the look pass between her and his guest. And he wasn't pleased by it.

"You're acquainted with my housekeeper, Mr. Turner?"

Lark hadn't expected the marquess to call the issue out. Tensing, she came to a stop and turned to face the room more fully. Turner flashed her a swift questioning glance as though asking if he should admit to their association. She gave another short nod and linked her fingers in front of her.

Warfield was aware of her past. There was nothing shameful in knowing someone who'd once run the same darkened streets of the East End.

Turner continued forward in an easy stride. "I was. Years ago."

He said nothing more as he calmly accepted his coat and hat from the footman, but his casual admittance had done nothing to warm to the chill in Warfield's gaze as he faced Turner.

"I expect we'll be in touch soon."

"Indeed, my lord," Turner replied as he gave a nod then walked through the front door.

Lark did not wait around to see if the marquess wished to question her further, but the chill in his manner followed her as she slipped

from the hall to walk swiftly toward her personal rooms.

Unfortunately, she didn't move quite fast enough.

"Mrs. Evans."

The marquess spoke softly but his tone allowed no room for her to ignore him.

She paused in the narrow hallway and turned back to face him. Keeping her expression flat and her voice unconcerned, though she was anything but, she replied simply, "Yes, my lord."

He continued forward. His tall, broad frame nearly filled the corridor as he came to a stop in front of her. "Do you have a few moments? There's something I'd like to discuss with you. Privately."

A thrill of anticipation passed through her at the dark nuance that flowed through the last word and the fact that he glanced past her shoulder to her closed bedroom door as he said it.

She wished she didn't immediately recall the feel of his arms around her, his hands on her body, his mouth, his lips—oh, God—his tongue! But she did. In a feverish rush. All at once. And desire made her feel instantly weak and wanting.

With a superhuman will, she forced the feeling away.

Surely, he didn't intend to continue what he'd put such a definite stop to the night before.

And surely, she didn't want him to.

But she did. Very much so. Unfortunately, she doubted that was his intention when his expression held such focused intensity.

"Of course," she muttered as she turned to open her door and led the way inside.

The click of the door closing again sent another thrill up her spine, but she ignored it just as she ignored the fact that her bed was only a few long strides away as she took a seat in one of the armchairs.

When the marquess took the other chair, she told herself this was no different than the conversations she'd had with Gideon in this same spot.

An utter lie, of course.

Keeping her spine straight and her hands linked in her lap, she looked to the marquess with a silent, expectant gaze.

It took a moment before he spoke. Long enough for her to feel his focus sliding gently over her face, pausing for a tingling, heart-stopping breath on her mouth before meeting her gaze.

"Tell me about Turner."

It definitely wasn't a request, but there was no hint of threat or animosity in his voice.

Lark allowed a slight furrow to her brow as she looked at him questioningly. "I don't know what I can tell you, my lord. I haven't been acquainted with him for many years."

“Then tell me what you *did* know of him.”

She could tell he was intent upon her answer and would not accept avoidance. But she wasn't about to betray an old friendship without knowing the reason for it.

“Why?”

Her question caused a scowl to mar his dark brow. It was clear he didn't want to explain himself, but Lark lifted a brow, making it equally clear she wouldn't be forthcoming without good cause.

“I've recently decided to work with him to resolve...the matter you and I discussed last night. I want to ensure I haven't made a mistake.”

An odd tightening claimed her as she finally understood. “And you're asking for my opinion?”

There was another long pause. Then his chin lowered, and he splayed his hands on the surface of his thighs as he glanced toward the low-glowing fire in her small grate.

“Just because I don't wish you to put yourself in undeniable peril doesn't mean I don't value your thoughts on the matter.” His blue eyes slid back to meet hers, causing a delicate shiver to dance across her nape. “Unless you'd be betraying a personal confidence.”

Taking a slow, deep breath, Lark tried to dispel the intimate haze his gaze inspired. Though the subject matter was anything but sensual, she couldn't seem to keep her body from reacting to his low tone and penetrating stare with visceral intensity.

“As I said, I haven't known Dell Turner for many years. Anything I tell you could no longer be true.”

“Details of a person's situation may change. Their location or their society or their occupation. But someone's base human qualities tend to remain constant.” He tilted his head. “What words would you use to define the man as you once knew him?”

Lark thought back to the times they'd worked together, the things she'd learned from him. “Cunning. Discerning. Resourceful.”

His voice was low. “You trusted him. A great deal.”

“With my life,” she noted in full honesty. “More than once.”

“Would you do the same today?”

There was no hesitation. “Absolutely.”

“I see.” He returned his attention to the fire. “Was he your lover?”

Lark's eyes widened at the unexpected question. Searching the dark angles of Warfield's face, she tried to determine the source of his inquiry. There was strain clear in the firm press of his lips and a forbidding shadow weighing down his brow, but she couldn't be sure why he'd ask such a thing.

She decided to answer honestly. “We were no more than children when I knew him. I guess I considered him a sort of mentor. And a rare friend.”

The marquess nodded, but she couldn't help but notice the tensing of his jaw muscle and the light flickering deep in his eyes.

"Would it matter if we had been more than that?"

The thought that he might possibly be feeling something akin to jealousy over her prior association with Turner gave her an intense rush of warmth.

Blue eyes bored into hers as the marquess appeared to search for something inside her. Instinct warred with intuition. One urging her to protect herself against the intensity of his gaze. The other desiring nothing more than to fall headlong into it.

"No." His answer was curt. Complete. Untrue.

Lark sighed, suddenly feeling very tired. Lowering her gaze, she rose to her feet. "I imagine you have important things to attend to. I won't keep you."

She crossed the room to the door, but just as she grasped the doorknob, she felt his presence close behind her. Closer than he had any need to be. Close enough for his broad chest to press against her back when he reached past her, covering her hand with his.

The position was far too reminiscent of those stolen minutes in the secret passage, and her body responded instantly to the memory. And the heat and smell of him.

Her breath caught sharply as a delicious, poignant pain arched through her center. It was longing and desire and a touch of fear all at once as she held herself still. Not knowing his intention. Breathlessly hoping it coincided with the intimate yearning she couldn't ignore.

"I apologize." His words were a heavy whisper. "I didn't mean to offend."

"You didn't," she answered quickly. Breathlessly.

His ragged breath brushed against her temple as he slid his hand over hers...slowly, deliberately...sparking tingling fire over her skin until his long fingers encircled her wrist.

With gentle but firm insistence, he urged her to release the doorknob. As soon as her fingertips left the cool brass, he lifted her hand to press it flat against the wall in front of her.

Her breath sped with her heartbeat as he held it there.

"Tell me to leave," he murmured, lowering his head beside hers. "Call me wicked and abhorrent." His voice could barely be heard as his lips moved against the sensitive skin below her ear. "Call me a blackguard and a cad."

"Why?" she gasped as he slipped an arm around her middle, pulling her tighter to him.

"Hate me. Revile me."

"I can't."

"You must," he growled. "It's the only way I'll be able to convince

myself to stay away from you.”

Lark tipped her head back and softly arched her spine. “I don’t want you to stay away.”

The sound that issued from his throat was raw and hungry. His arm tightened around her middle and his mouth opened against her throat. Shivers coursed through her at the first scrape of his teeth. A quiet moan slipped free and her knees went weak.

On her next breath, she turned her around. Now it was the wall pressed firmly to her back while the marquess remained hard and unforgiving in front of her. He still held one hand to the wall beside her head as he flattened his other hand to the wall as well.

She was effectively caged by him. By his need and the darkness inside him he didn’t even try to deny and the sensual draw she didn’t want to escape. She tipped her head back and looked into familiar features made hard by some silent torment. When she lifted her hand to the side of his face, she could feel the tension of his jaw against her palm.

With breathless care, she brushed her thumb across his lips and reveled in their smooth texture, firm, arching shape, and intimate warmth.

His brows lowered over his sparkling gaze as he parted his lips to nip at the pad of her thumb with his sharp teeth.

Her belly fluttered wildly, and she released a heavy, aching sigh into the space between them. The sound seemed to torment him even more. His expression grew so harsh it was nearly frightening. His body tensed and hardened against her while his fingers tightened around her wrist.

When she rose up to her toes, lifting her face to his, he stopped her with a low muttered, “Don’t.”

She stopped but didn’t retreat. Staring into eyes shadowed by the heavy weight of his brows, she asked simply, “Why not?”

His response was raw and tortured. “I don’t want to be like him.”

“You’re not,” she murmured desperately as she strained against him. Needing him.

He brought his hand to her nape, holding her in a tight grip as if he intended to keep her away from him. Instead, the action brought her mouth even closer to his.

She reveled in the subtle, dominating embrace as it kept his lips near hers and his hands on her body.

His tone lowered to a ragged growl. “I made you cry.”

When they’d been interrupted in the passage?

Gently but firmly, she whispered, “No, you didn’t. I was frustrated. And overwhelmed.” Holding his gaze, she confessed something she’d only recently acknowledged to herself. “I’ve survived on very little in

my life, and most often it was won by tooth and nail. But that doesn't mean I haven't wanted more. That doesn't mean I don't understand what I've been missing. Do you think I'd have allowed any of what happened between us if it wasn't exactly what I wanted? What I've been craving for so long?"

His grip tightened further. His eyes flashed with blue fire. Dangerous. Exciting. Arousing. "What have you been craving?"

"This," she sighed. "You."

His shook his head in denial. But his focus slid softly over her features to land intently on her lips. "You shouldn't." His voice was thick with pain and regret. "Mine is a dark soul, cursed and ruined before I was born."

The desire in his eyes was fierce and unadulterated. But she also saw the pain he tried to hide. The condemnation. Not of her but of himself.

She wanted to deny what he said, but she knew he wouldn't believe her. Not yet.

Lark shifted against him, sliding her hand from the side of his face into the satiny black hair at his nape. Bringing her mouth within a breath of his as she stared into his fierce blue eyes and whispered, "I'm not afraid of the dark."

Something bright and dangerous flared in his gaze. Then his mouth covered hers and his tongue thrust past her teeth to steal her breath.

It was a kiss of fire and demand. Of surrender and darkest need.

Lark sunk into it, allowing her body to melt into his. Thoughts flew away, leaving behind the basest human need. The need for connection.

She could feel that same need in him. In the way his hand squeezed the back of her neck. In the way he released her wrist to grasp her skirts, lifting them until he could reach beneath and wrap his hand firmly around her upper thigh, just above the edge of her stocking where her skin was bare and warm.

Desperate to encourage him further, she lifted her leg and hooked it around his hip. He immediately grasped hard to the curve of her buttock. Using his body and the wall behind her, he lifted her until she could wrap both legs around him, opening herself to the pressure of his hips between her thighs. The second she felt his hardness pressing firmly to her soft, aching core, a shiver coursed through her body.

Her gasp of shock and pleasure was claimed by his mouth. His wicked, ravenous, delicious mouth.

He grasped her buttocks in both hands. Strong fingers dug into her flesh as he tilted her pelvis toward him to better receive a rolling thrust of his hips.

She caught her bottom lip between her teeth, biting hard to hold back her moan.

A wicked light flared in the crystalline blue of his gaze as he rocked against her again.

Her lashes fluttered as a deep, tingling heat began in her core. A tingling that swirled outward to her fingers and toes.

Pleasure. But not enough.

A sound like a plea rose in her throat. Squeezing her eyes tightly closed, she held it back. Barely. She never would have thought she'd be brought to a point of begging. Not by anyone. But she'd never imagined a man with icy fire in his eyes and magic in his touch.

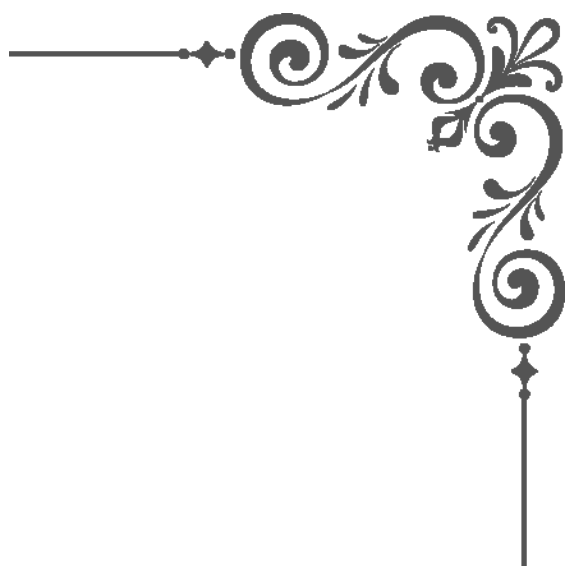
His hands tightened on her rear as he lowered his head beside hers.

"Stop me," he demanded in a fierce whisper.

"I won't."

"Hate me."

"I can't," she gasped as she turned her head to find his mouth with her own.



Chapter Twenty

Her lips tasted of truth and passion. She was the embodiment of every fantasy he'd ever had. She was all fire and fearlessness. Seduction itself.

And he was lost.

Lost in the scent of her skin, the sound of her shallow, gasping breaths, the feel of her body moving against him. Needful. She clutched at him. His hair, his coat. Anywhere she could grasp.

Though he reveled in the warmth between her thighs, he raged against the many layers of clothing still between them. And he could suddenly think of nothing he needed more than to feel her heated skin sliding against his.

With a growl of frustration and a kind of animalistic need he'd never experienced, he shifted his hold on her, lowering her feet back to the floor. His body rebelled at the loss of intimate contact, and he stood there for a moment, pressing her to the wall as he kissed her deep and long. When he felt he had proper control again, he broke from the kiss and lifted his head.

The grip of her hands around the back of his neck tightened as her eyes fluttered open. A shadow of confusion fell over the swirling gray depths but did nothing to conceal her desire, so bright and beautiful.

"I need more."

He hadn't intended to say the words circling relentlessly through his lust-clouded mind. His voice was rough. As ragged as his soul felt when she wet her bottom lip with her tongue before she replied in a sultry whisper, "I need you."

That voice in the back of his head—the one that constantly reminded him of his sire's legacy and how fiercely he intended to renounce it, the one that wouldn't allow him to forget his mother's impassioned accusations or the years she'd spent in undeserved shame—tried to remind him how wrong this was. But it was in vain.

He'd already fallen.

And when her hands tugged at his coat, shoving it off his shoulders until it fell to the floor, he was lost beyond recovery. By the time she started on his waistcoat, he had the buttons of her dress opened to her sternum. The sight of her bare collarbone and the white lace edge of her chemise was enough to cause a harsh tightening of his throat.

As soon as his waistcoat fell, she grasped fistfuls of his shirt,

helping to lift it up over his head. With a soft sound, her fingertips traced the pink scar along his side and he tensed. The knife wound was well on the mend, but the skin was sensitive, and he had no desire to be distracted from his current purpose. He was naked to the waist while her gown still covered her from head to toe. In a burst of frustration, he grasped the open edges of her bodice and pulled them from her body. She gasped as buttons scattered about their feet, but with a quick shimmy, she urged the gown down past her hips, along with her petticoat.

Impatient hunger roared through his blood as she bent forward to remove her shoes and stockings. A moment later, she stood in nothing but her thin cotton chemise, and Alastair lost the ability to speak.

Her figure was slim with modest curves. There was obvious strength in her limbs and a capable resilience in her posture that had likely been formed over years of physical hardship and adversity. She was a woman whose sensuality was multiplied by the sum of its parts. Every detail of who she was combined in a way that was nearly incapacitating.

He'd never seen anything so fascinating. So bloody mouthwatering.

But when she lifted her hands to release the pins from her hair, he realized he'd barely even begun to explore the allure this woman possessed. Sweat beaded on his brow and the muscles of his abdomen tightened. His breath grew shallow and a hollow ache formed in his chest. As her pale hair fell down around her shoulders, he acknowledged the fierce desire raging through him. Threatening to consume him. Threatening to consume them both.

If he couldn't resist it, he at least must control it.

But while he remained locked in place, every muscle in his body tensed and hard, she met his gaze and lifted her chin. It was a brief and subtle gesture—a quick glimpse of the bold nature she typically tried to conceal.

Holding his stare, she gracefully slipped the strap of her chemise off one shoulder. When the soft material slid down to catch over the gentle mound of her breast, the slight caress of cotton caused her nipple to pucker beautifully.

Though he ached to reach for her, he kept his hands strictly at his sides.

Seemingly undaunted by his fierce stillness, she slipped the other strap from her shoulder, and the undergarment slid sinuously down her body to the floor. And every inch of her female form was exposed to his lustful gaze.

She was perfect. Proud and strong and shameless.

The sound that rose up from his chest was more beast than man. More hunger than desire.

The stunning beauty of her—the bold courage and fierce self-possession—broke the last of his minimal restraint. One long stride brought his body in contact with hers. The soft silk of her skin against his felt like heaven. The crush of her breasts, the rapid beat of her heart, the sound of her breath catching in her throat. Her passion and fire were nearly as strong as his own. But nothing in the world could come close to the depth of need claiming every inch of him as he took her mouth with his.

Her moan was soft and deep. Her body arched against him, as though seeking more. He plunged his tongue past her teeth, gliding hot and slick along hers as he tasted the deepest treasures of her mouth. He wanted to claim the very essence of her and take it inside himself. Make it his. Make her his.

The thought of it nearly made him mad. And when he felt the smooth caress of her hands on his skin, he clenched his teeth hard against the swift urge to thrust himself inside her.

Still kissing her as though he'd draw her very soul from her lips, he lifted her hands to the wall above her head. He held her wrists secure in one hand as he eased his hips back enough to reach down between them. Her belly was smooth and trembled beneath the gentle caress of his fingertips. With a catch in her breath, she broke from the kiss. And when he began to explore the soft curls shielding her mound, she squeezed her eyes tight and closed her teeth over her bottom lip.

It was gorgeous.

The anticipation in her features. The trembling and yearning. The sweet torment. The absolute beauty and trust.

"You claim to have no fear of darkness," he whispered thickly. "What about sin?"

"I was raised by the rookery, my lord. I'm no stranger to sin."

Alastair slipped his fingers along her seam, dewy with desire. Blood rushed hot and fierce through his veins. Making him light-headed and hard as stone.

"And pleasure?" he asked, his voice heavy with lust.

Her eyes were dark and stormy as they met his. She extended her tongue to run the tip along her bottom lip before she responded. "I've known precious little of it in my life."

Alastair clenched his jaw against the rush of wild emotion through his chest. He caressed her private flesh again—a soft, gentle stroke—but this time, he curled his middle finger so the flat of his fingertip eased along her inner folds.

Her gasp slid swiftly into a quiet moan as his head fell back against the wall and her lashes fluttered over her gaze.

"Then I'll drown you in it. I want pleasure to be all you know when you're with me," he muttered gruffly. "Will you allow it?"

Her hands strained in his grip and her low back arched, inspiring a gentle roll of her hips. His fingers slid intimately through the slick heat of her sex. Trembling erupted in his belly and rose up through his throat in a rough groan. He leaned forward to rest his forehead against the wall. Turning his head, he pressed a kiss to the silken skin below her ear.

“Will you allow me to pleasure you?” he asked again, needing her answer.

“Please,” she replied on a sigh.

“My sweet angel,” he whispered, “you exceed every possible fantasy. I must taste you.”

Releasing her wrists, he dropped to his knees. Though she stiffened in surprise, he couldn’t gather the words to assure her. He was far too focused on the treasure before him.

A soft belly and trembling thighs. Golden curls and the heady scent of her desire.

He murmured soothing words as he slid his hands up the backs of her thighs to the undercurve of her lush little rear, then down again to tease the backs of her knees. Taking a deep breath of her scent, he reveled in how the essence of her swirled inside him, stoking the fires of desire, sending pulse waves of tingling pleasure through his blood.

Hooking one knee with his hand, he lifted her leg until it rested over his shoulder. She offered no resistance to his direction, submitting to him with utter trust and a tremulous sigh of anticipation. With his thumbs, he gently parted her soft folds, exposing her to his hungry gaze.

She was delicate perfection. Glistening and pink.

An animalistic growl twisted through his core as he became overcome by a primitive urge to claim. Possess. Devour.

The first touch of his tongue to her velvety, slick warmth was like sipping from heaven. The second slow lick brought him to the fieriest depths of hell as a ravenous need clutched at him. Inside and out. His skin burned. His muscles shook.

Spreading his knees on the floor to brace himself, he flattened one hand on her soft belly, loving how she trembled for him. When pressed his open mouth over the swollen bud at the apex of her sex, her thighs tensed. When he gently suckled her sensitive flesh, her knees went weak. It was all he could do to simply hold her secure—against the wall, propped by his shoulder, held by his hand—as he gave in to the hunger raging through him.

Licking, delving, thrusting with his tongue. Sucking, nipping, teasing. Feasting on her lush female heat. Until she shook and moaned. Until she grasped at his head to hold him there between her thighs. Until she gasped for breath and her body went taut and her sex

pulsed against his lavishing tongue.

Even after the intimate shocks of her pleasure receded, he couldn't stop soothing her with soft kisses and languid thrusts of his tongue into her hot, sweet passage. He ached to go deeper. To claim her completely. But above all, he didn't want to hurt her. Or push her into anything she might regret.

That thought alone was what convinced him to draw back.

Reluctantly wiping her essence from his mouth, he lowered her foot to the floor before sliding his hand to her waist as he rose to his feet.

Her breasts were flushed, and her nipples were pebbled to a dusky rose while her breath puffed erratically through parted lips that appeared swollen from being held between her teeth. Her eyes were closed, but she reached for him, sliding one hand around the back of his neck as a soft, incomprehensible sound slid from her throat.

Her bed, tucked into the shadowed corner behind a thin folding screen, was narrow and small. But the rug before the fire was thick and warm. He swept her languid body into his arms and crossed the room in long strides before laying her down. A knit shawl was draped over the chair nearby, and he spread it over her naked form to keep her from feeling a chill.

It took another minute for him to add wood to the grate until greater warmth spread into the room. When he turned back to her, she had rolled to her side and curled her limbs toward her center. Her eyes were steady and clear as she watched him.

His tongue thickened in his mouth and his throat closed as he acknowledged that he hadn't the slightest idea what to say to her.

What he wanted more than anything was to lower himself beside her, pull her into the strength and heat of his body as he wrapped himself around her. He wanted to pretend the two of them existed in a space and time separate from the rest of the world outside her cozy little room. Separate from the past and the uncertain future.

But such dreams were impossible.

It was far more likely she'd realize her error in allowing him the indescribable beauty of making love to her. She'd regret the pleasure he gave her and fear the possibility of ruin or worse.

Sitting back on his heels beside the hearth, he fisted his hands and pressed them to the tops of his thighs. Clenching his back teeth, he forced a severe expression as he met her gaze. He couldn't risk her seeing how badly he still hungered for her. Ached for her. Needed her.

The silence between them was interrupted only by the crackle of the fire and the heavy beat of his heart.

"I can see the thoughts running through your head, my lord."

He scowled, trying harder to conceal the torment inside him.

Then she sighed. Soft and slow. A gentle exhale. Pushing herself up to a seated position with her legs folded gracefully to one side, she allowed the shawl to drop to her lap.

Alastair struggled to keep his gaze from roaming wildly over every inch of her soft skin as it warmed beneath the dancing firelight.

Lowering her chin, she spoke in a tone that was both quiet and firm. Soft but unrelenting. “A chilly stare can’t fool me anymore.”

Old emotions rose from the depths of darkness inside him, clawing to be free. His legacy was one of lechery and depravity. He’d been born of it and had lived most of his life under the shroud of his mother’s shame and loathing.

His fists tightened as his stomach churned. “You couldn’t possibly understand.”

“Explain it to me, then.”

He couldn’t. Couldn’t put words to the twisted feelings he’d inherited. The hatred burning inside him. The fear that this was how he’d always feel. Even after he destroyed the brotherhood and avenged his mother. How could a soul so blackened ever be cleansed?

Though the heat of the fire behind him began to burn the skin of his bare back, he felt chilled inside by an icy surety. As the woman in front of him watched him with gray eyes filled with calm strength and undoubting confidence, he acknowledged how wrong it all was. How wrong he was.

He altered his gaze—unable to look at her without pain spearing through his center—as he pushed abruptly to his feet. The urge to apologize scratched at his throat, but he couldn’t get the words out. He wasn’t sorry for having tasted of her lush sweetness, for having held her as he brought her pleasure. He couldn’t be sorry for that. The memories would likely stay with him the rest of his life.

She did not voice a protest or stir from her position on the floor as he collected his hastily discarded clothing. After drawing his shirt over his head, he clutched the rest of his garments in one hand, and he stared hard at her closed door.

He should dress completely. If anyone caught a glimpse of him leaving her room in his current state, there would no question as to what had transpired between them. She’d be ruined, shamed, and degraded. But he couldn’t stay another moment, feeling her silent gaze on his back.

Reaching for the door handle, he finally spoke. “I’ll keep my distance going forward. You must do the same.”

He didn’t wait for a reply before quickly exiting the room. He didn’t expect one.



LARK SIGHED—DEEPLY, with a breath that scored her throat and brought with it the prick of tears. But she wouldn't cry. She'd learned long ago that it never did any good. Instead, once the sound of Warfield's footsteps faded away, she rose to her feet and redressed in a new gown. Then she gathered her scattered buttons and her hairpins. She'd sew the buttons back on later. Right now, she needed to get back to work.

I'll keep my distance going forward. You must do the same.

His final words to her echoed through her head. She'd do what he instructed. As best she could, anyway, in her current circumstances. For his sake but also for hers. Because she could no longer deny how deeply her feelings ran for the man when his departure from her room just now had nearly broken her in a way she hadn't believed possible.

She'd seen and lived through too many heart-hardening experiences in her life. She'd long since believed herself incapable of heartache.

Warfield, however, had proven her wrong in that. And in other things.

It was clear he was consumed by the pain of his origins. When he told her his mother's story, though he'd tried to keep his voice free of emotion, the damage done to his mother by his father had been passed on him. Thrown onto him. From an age when he wouldn't have been able to see that his mother's shame was not his own. Unable to contemplate that, although he'd been the result of something horrific and terrible, he was not to blame. Nor was he responsible.

He'd carried the weight of it all for so long, the fear that he was destined to become like the monster who'd sired him. He didn't know how to release it. He might never know how. And because of that, he might never allow himself to be with her in the way she could see he wanted. In the way they both so obviously needed.

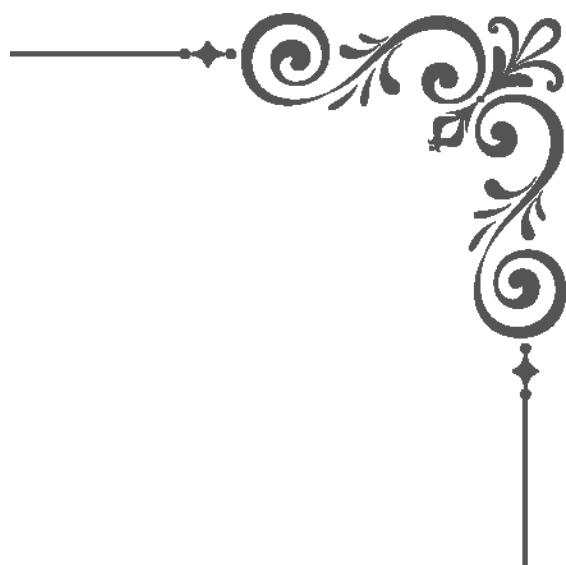
And though she could see those truths and even understand them, she had to acknowledge that she couldn't change them. Only he could do that.

As she checked her reflection in the small oval mirror beside her wardrobe and patted her hair to ensure it was properly righted, she noted the uncharacteristic regret and quiet longing in her own familiar gaze.

One thing was for certain; he wouldn't begin to see things differently until the brotherhood was destroyed.

He wanted her to remain safely ensconced in the house.

That simply wasn't going to happen.



Chapter Twenty-one

The private game room at the club was paneled in dark wood, which had been polished to a gleaming shine that reflected the light from the chandelier above the table. The liquor and food were French. And the stakes were high.

Alastair scowled as he stared at the cards he'd just been dealt. Then he slid a surreptitious glance at each of the other players. Marlowe sat across from him, grumbling beneath his breath. Lowndes was to his right, as smug and arrogant as always. And Chesterfield sat to his left.

He'd been laying the groundwork all evening—betting high, playing recklessly, drinking too much—and couldn't wait much longer to enact the final aspect of his plan. As everyone placed their bets for the next round, he made sure to add a sigh of dramatic effect.

"My God, Warfield, if the play is too bloody steep, remove yourself from the game," Marlowe muttered, finally giving Alastair the opportunity he needed. "I can't stand another of your long-suffering groans."

"Apologies, my lord. I'm afraid I can't afford not to play. It's all or nothing for me these days."

"What are you talking about?" Chesterfield asked incredulously. "The Warfield coffers have always been fat. Your father certainly had no troubles. He lived a rather lavish lifestyle as I recall."

"That's the problem," Alastair retorted as he downed the last of the fine brandy in his glass. Then he gestured to the footman standing in the corner for a refill. "The old man had no trouble at all spending the vast Warfield fortune, leaving nothing behind but debt. And I've just about run out of options to rectify his carelessness."

"That can't be true," Marlowe argued.

"I assure you, it's very true," Alastair retorted sharply. "Warfield House is gutted. Everything not entailed has been sold. I know you were friends with my father, but all I inherited from the bastard was trouble."

There was an awkward moment of silence when Alastair wondered if he'd gone too far, but then Chesterfield offered a kind smile. "Your father was a friend, that's true, but we were well aware of his"—he shared a glance with Marlowe—"many faults, shall we say."

"Yes, well, I beg your pardon, gentlemen, if I appear a bit

desperate. Frankly, I am.”

Chesterfield laid the first card and the play began. Alastair did his best to appear unaware of the secret glances passing between the other men at the table.

“Have you no investments?” Lowndes asked after a couple rounds.

“I’ve looked into a few, but I’ve got no true collateral, and I’m new in town, so no one will give me an advance or a loan. People may remember my father, but no one knew I existed until a few months ago.”

“Your father had his reasons for keeping you away from London. I didn’t necessarily agree with him, but...” Chesterfield let his words fade off as he gave a dismissive gesture with one hand. “My point is that as your father’s oldest friends—and now yours—we’re here for you, my boy.”

Lord Marlowe grunted in a way that could have indicated agreement or annoyance.

Alastair twisted his lips into a wry smile as he tossed a card to the table. “Excellent. Do any one of you want to fund me for an investment venture?”

“No,” Lowndes replied smoothly, “but there is something we may be able to offer.”

“I’m only interested if it guarantees a healthy return. No speculation. I need a sure thing.”

“Don’t want much, do you?” Marlowe scoffed.

Alastair’s reply was a shrug as he tipped back his brandy. Thank God he’d managed to get to the footman ahead of time to offer a healthy bribe if the man could manage to serve him only from a bottle that had been carefully watered down. “Desperate, remember.”

Lowndes’s lips curved into a sly smile, but his gaze remained sharp as he met Alastair’s. “My offer shouldn’t be taken lightly. I’m giving you an opportunity that won’t come around often and pays a *guaranteed* fortune. There’s significant risk, but it’s not monetary.” He slid a glance to the other men. “Nor is the buy-in.”

Marlowe grumbled something to himself, but Chesterfield reached across the table to give his hand a grandfatherly pat. “I’d listen to the man if I were you, Warfield.” Then he laughed. “I did and I’m not the only one. I assure you, you won’t regret it.”



THE NEXT COUPLE OF days passed in a frustrating sort of stalemate.

Every morning, Lark delivered the lord’s tea and they spoke their usual words, but he didn’t look at her unless he had to. And then, it was with an expression as devoid of emotion as the first time they’d met.

But it was visions of how he'd looked while kneeling before her fire—tormented, sad, regretful—that kept her awake at night. Far more than the memories of how it felt to be loved by him for even those brief moments, though those heated memories also burned through her mind as she lay in the loneliness of her bed.

One night, she couldn't take it anymore. After hours of sleeplessness, she rose from her bed and dressed in her dark boys' clothing. She tucked her hair beneath the woolen cap and tossed an oversized coat over it all. Then she snuck out the servants' entrance and crossed the garden to the mews.

She had no real destination. No purpose calling her out that night but her own intolerable restlessness and the need to think of anything but the marquess. She'd read and reread Harriet's love letters a dozen times to no avail. There was nothing there to direct her. Nothing beyond the initials W.K. to work with, and that was too vague to lead her anywhere at all.

So, she wandered. With her hands in her pockets, her chin tucked to her chest, and her gaze directed mostly at her feet—a dangerous practice, she was well aware—she wandered the lanes and streets with which she'd forced herself to become familiar.

Until she looked up at one point and found herself in front of Dryden's darkened mansion. As her focus rose to the narrow attic window that had once been Harriet's, she felt a sorrowful tightening in her chest.

Where are you, Harriet? Where have you gone? I'd give anything to know you're all right. To talk with you.

A painful knot formed in her stomach, and she swallowed hard to keep her sadness from rising in her throat.

But she couldn't indulge in the sense of loss for long as the sound of carriage wheels approaching forced her to melt into the nearest shadow. By her estimation, it had to be near three o'clock in the morning. There were only a few reasons to be out at such an hour, and she had no desire to be caught off guard by one of the local gentlemen.

As the vehicle neared, she observed it to be a simple conveyance rather than a grand vehicle she'd expect to be driven by a man of wealth and prestige. It came almost even with her as it slowed and then stopped in front of the house next door to Lord Dryden's.

Lark struggled to recall from her discussion with Gideon who resided at that address, but her memory came up blank. She didn't think it was a lord or anyone of high status, though the house itself was fine enough. But she felt she would have recalled a reference to the owner from Warfield's notes if he were relevant to his investigations.

With some of her fear subdued, curiosity rose to the fore, and she silently crept from her place to get a better look at who was currently disembarking. As she got closer, she could hear two voices in huddled discussion. One male and one female. They seemed to be intent on not being overheard, so she couldn't make out their words. But the tenor and rhythm of the female's voice sent an instant shock through her system.

Could it be possible?

Her steps became heavy and swift in her haste, and her breath shortened with dreadful hope. As soon as she came around the corner of the carriage, it was to see a man nearing middle age, dressed in a gray overcoat and bowler hat, who abruptly turned to face her more squarely as though to shield the woman behind him from whatever threat Lark might pose.

Ignoring the man completely, Lark continued forward, though at a slightly less desperate pace.

"Ho, there. Halt!" the man said in a stern, level voice as he raised the bag he was holding as a makeshift shield. "Come no closer, boy."

But Lark could only peer around him, trying to find something that could confirm her wild suspicion. Some detail in the woman's form or manner. But the man shielded her well.

Finally, she was forced to come to a hesitant, reluctant stop as Harriet's name escaped on a helpless sigh.

As soon as the name slipped free, the brim of a bonnet popped up over the man's shoulder as a gasp cut through the air. "Lark!"

And then Lark was breathing in Harriet's familiar scent as the other woman launched herself forward to meet Lark in a fierce embrace. Relieved laughter tumbled from them both. She couldn't believe it. After so many weeks of fear and worry and searching, she'd found her. Right here, on Curzon Street. In the middle of the night...

Lark had practically forgotten about the man witnessing their reunion until he roughly cleared his throat. "I hate to interrupt, but it'd be best to take this inside, my dear."

Harriet started and pulled away. Lark got only a brief impression of her dearest friend's tear-stained face as Harriet turned back to her companion. "Of course. Let's do that." Then, she linked her arm securely through Lark's as they followed the man up the steps and through the front door.

"To my office, please."

Lark would've gone anywhere at that moment.

She settled beside Harriet on a modest settee while the gentleman went about closing the drapes before lighting a lamp, keeping the illumination to a dim glow. Despite her relief and disbelief, Lark acknowledged the thread of caution weaving between the couple and

now herself.

There was danger about. A risk. A need for wary care.

"How is it possible you're here?" Harriet breathed in whispered shock.

Lark looked into the familiar features that would always resemble to some degree those of the tiny girl-child who'd been so near to freezing and starvation. Yet she couldn't deny the new air of maturity she sensed in the younger woman.

"I was about to ask the same. Where've you been? Your letter—"

"Urged you not to search for me," Harriet admonished, her eyes narrowing in accusation and concern. "I told you to stay away from here."

Lark lifted a brow. "You really expected me to heed such nonsense?"

Harriet's expression darkened as she clasped both of Lark's hands in hers. "Not nonsense, I swear it. For once, I wasn't exaggerating."

"She's right," the gentleman in the bowler hat stepped forward to say in earnest. "There is a true threat, which is why we've come back only to fetch a few things before leaving town." He glanced urgently to Harriet. "We really shouldn't dally."

"I know," Harriet replied. "Please, fetch what you must. I'll be fine here with Lark. I promise."

Though he was obviously reluctant, he gave a nod, then left them in the room alone.

As soon as he was out of hearing, Lark spoke bluntly. "What happened to you? Where've you been? Have you been hurt? Who in bloody hell is that man and why are you with him?"

Harriet laughed and the sound went a long way toward dispelling much of Lark's tension and worry. But it didn't provide any answers.

"So many questions, but I'll answer them as efficiently as possible in the time we have."

She paused to smooth her skirts and straighten her gloves, obviously sorting through her thoughts for a place to start.

"I'm sorry, Lark. So much has happened." She released an apologetic sigh and gave a tentative smile. "First of all, I'm utterly in love."

That much Lark already knew, but her friend's obvious happiness was far too infectious, and she smiled in return. "Am I to understand that man is W.K.?"

Harriet's eyes widened, but she didn't seem terribly shocked by Lark's question. "You found the letters?" Then she waved a hand in dismissal. "Of course you did. I know well not to underestimate you."

"His name is Dr. William Kirby. He's a brilliant physician and the kindest, most"—she sighed heavily—"wonderful man." She slipped

the glove off her left hand, revealing a lovely ring of gold cradling a solitary emerald. "We were married a few weeks ago. In Scotland. We've only just gotten back to town."

Lark's shock couldn't have been greater if Harriet had told her the man was the prince regent himself. "Married?"

"Oh, Lark, I'm so sorry. I'd have done anything to have had you there with me, but it was a rather hasty exit from London." Her soft eyes turned troubled. "You see, there was an incident...at my place of employment."

"Lord Dryden." Lark's voice was hard, drawing Harriet's surprised gaze.

"How did you know?" Then she shook her head with a smile. "Never mind. I should've guessed you'd have it all figured out."

"Not *all*," Lark corrected. "I had no idea where you'd gone. Or if Dryden had managed to hurt you,"

"He didn't," Harriet assured quickly. "I knew what he was about and managed to escape and run from the house before he could do any real harm. But for a moment there...I admit, I was frightened. He and his friends were all quite foxed. And rather intent upon their amusement." Her eyes widened. "He actually told me to strip down. Right then and there. I might be naïve, but I'm not stupid. When I refused, he shared a glance with the others and smiled. It was the vilest sight I'd ever seen. That was when he said he'd had a feeling I was a defiant sort. That he preferred it that way but he'd have to take me somewhere more secure, where no one would hear my screams. He referred to it as the marketplace"—she tilted her head and furrowed her brow—"which was odd considering markets are typically quite busy."

Lark's stomach twisted with the realization of how close her friend had come to a horrid fate. "Thank God you made it out of there."

A sly grin widened Harriet's mouth. "When he made a grab for me, I fought dirty—like you taught me. As soon as my knee brought him low, I ran as fast as I could until I reached safety. I tore out of there like the hounds of hell were on my heels, but I didn't have to go far since I knew Dr. Kirby was just next door. I couldn't bring myself to tell him what'd happened at first. But he was gentle and kind and promised he'd keep me safe. By morning, I'd agreed to marry him." Her smile then was radiant as she held Lark's hand in both of hers. "He loves me. He truly does. Isn't it amazing?"

"Not at all." Lark smiled. "You're the most deserving of love out of anyone I've ever known. But I wish you'd felt you could've told me you were eloping."

Harriet glanced down at her lap. "I'm sorry. It was happening so fast. And I guess a part of me worried you might try to stop me."

“I’d never want to keep you from your happiness, Harriet. It’s all I’ve ever wanted for you.”

Tears filled Harriet’s eyes. “Thank you. I know that. I do. And I desperately want the same for you.”

“I’ve gathered what I need.” Both women turned to see Dr. Kirby standing in the doorway. Addressing a gentle smile to his bride, he added, “The rest can be fetched at a later date. But I don’t think it’d be prudent to tarry long, my dear.”

“Yes. You’re right,” Harriet replied with a nod. “Dr. Kirby—”

“William,” he interjected in a soft but stern tone.

She smiled. “*William* found a place to let in Suffolk, in a village that’s in need of a qualified doctor. You probably think me a coward for not going to the authorities—”

“Not at all,” Lark interrupted. “You’re right to get away. Men like Dryden...can’t always be fought through honorable means. Not when they use their wealth and privilege to protect themselves from proper justice.”

“Thank you for understanding. But it’s just as we’ve always dreamed, Lark. A country cottage, away from the city.” Her eyes widened on a gasp, and she glanced to her new husband before looking back to Lark. “You should come with us.”

Before Harriet even finished the statement, Lark was shaking her head.

“Oh, you must. I don’t know how I’ll survive being so far away from you.”

“That’s totally ridiculous and you know it,” Lark replied firmly. “You have your husband now. And you’ll be far too busy being happy to even think of me. But even if I could leave London, I wouldn’t want to. Not right now.” She glanced down for a second before meeting her friend’s curious gaze. “There’s something important I must do.”

Harriet knew better than to argue, so she nodded and squeezed Lark’s hand. “Be careful,” she whispered. “And get away from this neighborhood as soon as you can. Then come visit me in Suffolk.”

“I will,” Lark said with a smile. “Promise.”

The women rose to their feet and embraced. It might be years before they saw each other again. Months at the very least. But Harriet was safe and happy and that was all that mattered.

Still, knowing exactly how close Harriet had been to becoming a victim of the same wickedness perpetuated against the marquess’s mother filled Lark with renewed purpose.

Though she was tempted to watch as Dr. and Mrs. Kirby drove away, dawn was not far away, and she’d soon have to start her duties as housekeeper. Yet, as she began to slip back through the night, an impulse claimed her, and she suddenly changed direction.

Dryden House was quiet and still. The servants who'd been left to manage the place in the family's absence all slept on the third floor. She intended to be in and out again before any of them awoke.

Gratefully, her tools were still in the pocket of her trousers, and she made quick work of the garden door. With silent steps, she made her way through the house, peeking into rooms until she found the one she wanted.

The gentleman's study.

After ensuring the drapes were all closed and the door was secured behind her, she lit a single candle. Then she began her search. She wasn't exactly looking for anything specific, just trusted she'd know if she came across something pertinent to his involvement in the marquess's investigations. She'd told the man she could help, and that's what she'd do, whether he wanted her to or not.

When she began leafing through a leather portfolio containing information on various estate holdings and investments, a tingle of anticipation danced along her nerves. Then, nearly halfway through the documentation, she came upon a bill of sale dated several years prior for a piece of property located on a small street off Drury Lane in Covent Garden.

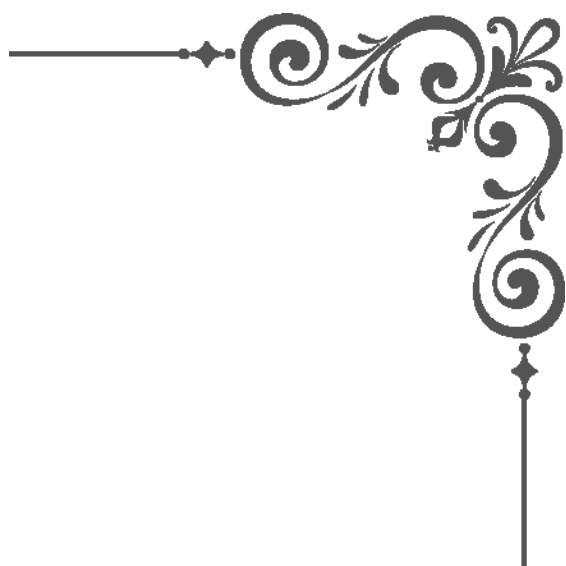
Lark knew the street well. At one time, it had been the site of an open market, but too much thievery and rowdy crowds had eventually shut it down. To make use of the space, developers put up a row of small warehouses with offices in front, but the venture didn't pan out well, and last she knew, most of the buildings sat empty.

Except this one, perhaps.

She reviewed the paperwork carefully. It appeared Dryden put quite a bit of money into the property after his initial purchase. An odd investment for a lord of Mayfair, to say the least.

The marketplace.

That's where Dryden had said he'd intended to take Harriet. Where he might have taken any number of other girls. A place where no one would hear their screams.



Chapter Twenty-two

Hale sauntered into Warfield's study with the air of a man who expected space to be made for him. Large, brutish, rough in manner as well as appearance. Alastair hadn't been expecting him and frowned in response to the other man's wide, unrepentant grin.

"Good evening, Warfield."

"It might've been," Alastair retorted before giving a nod to Dell Turner, who strode in after Hale. "Turner."

"My lord. As you can see, Mr. Hale's decided to join us."

Though Alastair would have preferred to have things handled without the former bare-knuckle boxer's involvement, it seemed that was not to be. He couldn't imagine what the man could contribute to their discussion this evening, but he was here now and no point wasting time bemoaning that fact.

He allowed a few moments for his guests to get comfortable before he settled his focus on Turner and got right to the point of their meeting. "My suspicions about the brotherhood are correct. The special event they're planning is to be a sale by bid. Two young women, recently procured by these *gentlemen*"—he sneered the word—"are to be presented to a select group of guests. The man with the highest bid claims the woman as his, to be used in whatever way he sees fit."

"Fucking hell," Hale muttered under his breath as he slouched back on the sofa, an expression curiously close to self-disgust twisting his hard features.

"That's karma, mate," Turner said without an ounce of sympathy.

At Alastair's questioning glance, Turner simply replied, "Hale has a few things to atone for. Your description hits a little close to home."

"Arsehole," Hale muttered.

Turner just smiled as he ignored his friend to ask, "Am I correct in assuming you'll be attending this event?"

"I've been invited," Alastair replied. "They believe me destitute and in need of funds. I'm to have a share in the profits of the evening—which they've promised will be beyond expectation—if I offer something in return."

As he finished speaking, he could see exactly when the other men understood. Turner was first, though his reaction was little more than a tightening of his jaw and a darkening awareness in his eyes. Hale,

however, muttered another expletive and curled his hand into a fist. "They sure know how to rope you in, the bastards."

"Did they give you an address?" Turner asked curtly.

"No. They'll be sending a vehicle for me at an appointed hour. I'm to know nothing of the destination until I arrive."

"Well, I believe I've narrowed it down to one of three possible locations. Two in Covent Garden and the last closer to Soho. Each of them is owned by one of the men from our list. I've managed to visit them in turn. Covertly, of course."

Now, Alastair leaned forward. "What did you find?"

"All three appear abandoned from the outside, but one of them in Covent Garden revealed something curious. Built for business and storage, the two-story building is large for the area but small in terms of typical warehouses. The windows are all shuttered, as would be expected for an empty building not in use. Except I noted four men circling the property, and a few people local to the area mentioned having seen toffs in carriages come and go on occasion."

Anticipation flickered through Alastair's blood. "Curious, indeed."

"Turner and I'll be returning later tonight," Hale noted with a glimmer of anticipation in his gaze. "See if we can have a little talk with the blokes who guard the place."

"If it turns out to be the location we're seeking, I'll install some of my associates nearby to keep watch. The night of the sale, we'll be ready."

"It will all be for naught if they manage to bribe their way out of the authorities' hands," Alastair warned. "We must make sure the charges are indisputable."

"There's got to be something inside, right? Some sort of records?" Hale asked. "We could take a good look around tonight while we're there."

Alastair shook his head. "No. They must be caught in the act. The brotherhood. The buyers. Every single one of them needs to be held accountable for their crimes against these women. We can't risk tipping them off ahead of time. We have to move forward carefully."

"I agree," Turner replied.

"Everything takes place two nights from now," Alastair explained. "If I arrive alone, I won't be allowed entrance." He sneered. "They're not requiring I provide a girl who meets all the usual criteria since I've such limited time, but they insisted on a few particulars nonetheless."

"I can imagine," Hale muttered.

Alastair focused on Turner. He'd have preferred to say anything but his next words. "I truly wish I didn't have to suggest this, but your wife..."

Before he could even finish his thought, Turner was shaking his

head. “Although she’d likely be very enthusiastic to accept such a role,” he noted with another glance to Hale, who rolled his eyes, “she can’t. She’s already been seen by the other members at Lowndes’s party. Though a clever disguise might fool most of them, it wouldn’t fool Lowndes, who insisted on closely evaluating each courtesan to ensure she passed his high standards before bringing her in for the night. As soon as he recognized Portia, the whole thing would be done.”

“Blast,” Alastair muttered.

“I’ll do it.” The words came from the far corner of the room and were spoken in a firm female voice he recognized in an instant.

Immediately rising to his feet, he turned to see Lark standing in front of the access to the secret passage. The passage from which she’d apparently been listening in on their private conversation.

“You were not invited to this discussion, Mrs. Evans,” he noted coldly.

Her expression wasn’t the slightest bit contrite. “Yet here I am. And I believe I’ve something valuable to add to it, if I may speak.”

He wanted to refuse. To order her back to her safe little housekeeper’s room and her cozy little fire. But he saw something in her gaze, the intrepid boldness he’d always expected to reveal itself now fully and unashamedly displayed. Something had changed. Her desperate determination had been replaced by calm, focused, and fearless intention.

Admiration rushed through him, but he forced a heavy scowl. “I suspect I won’t be able to stop you.”



PRIDE TIPPED HER CHIN at his beleaguered response. He was right. She would’ve had to have been dragged out of there if he’d refused to hear her out. And though eavesdropping on one’s employer was an unforgiveable transgression, she wasn’t the slightest bit remorseful.

Though she hadn’t made it back to Warfield House until the sun was coming up that morning and hadn’t managed to catch any sleep before starting her duties, she was oddly invigorated. Seeing Harriet safely off with her new husband—a man of whom Lark couldn’t help but approve after all he’d risked to keep her friend safe—had finally dispelled the weight of worry and uncertainty that she’d been carrying for weeks. Leaving behind a new, emboldened purpose.

She’d heard of Mr. Hale’s visit shortly after he’d arrived and that he’d been accompanied by another man, whom Gideon had been unable to name. That in itself was an oddity considering the butler’s extensive knowledge of Warfield’s acquaintances and associates, but Lark was convinced the meeting had something to do with the

marquess's efforts against the men of Curzon Street, which meant she was determined to hear every word.

As soon as she'd been able, Lark had rushed to the library and slipped easily into the hidden passage. She'd crept along until she was behind the study then shamelessly pressed her ear to the concealed door.

She'd already decided she was going to help Warfield whether he wanted her to or not. But now, after overhearing what these three men had said, she knew exactly how she was going to do it.

Walking forward despite being the target of the marquess's hard stare and forbidding frown, she knew he'd refuse her plan. At first, anyway. She could only hope the other two men might be easier to convince.

Mason Hale watched her with a half smirk on his broad face and curious glint in his eye. But a quick glance at Dell Turner told her nothing about whether he'd offer support or opposition to her plan.

Coming to a stop before the three men, she turned to the marquess. "I found Harriet."

His surprise was evident for just a moment before he masked it with a cautious stare. "And is she well?"

Lark nodded as she linked her hands together at her waist and saw the flash of relief in his eyes. "She is. Quite well. Though if not for Dr. William Kirby, who has since become her husband, she might not have been."

"Please, take a seat," Warfield said, gesturing to the last remaining spot beside Hale.

The large man made a valiant effort to fold himself into the corner of the sofa, but it wasn't really necessary since Lark barely perched at the edge of the cushion.

Under the focus of three intense gazes, Lark recounted the tale as Harriet had told it to her. Just saying the words out loud inspired another fierce rush of fury and determination. When she finished, she looked at each of the men in turn, settling lastly on the marquess. "After hearing what you've all said here this evening, I've no doubt what Lord Dryden had intended for Harriet. She managed to escape. It's clear that many others have not." Stiffening her spine, she kept her gaze steady and strong. "You must take me."

"No."

A single word. Sharp. Unbending. Final.

"You must," she repeated, more firmly.

"No." His voice was flat and hard while his expression became as cold as she'd ever seen, which meant he was working intently to conceal what he was feeling.

"Yes," she returned. Calm and unwavering.

Warfield rose to his feet, every muscle in his body tensed in denial. "I won't deliver you into their hands like a lamb to slaughter." Though the words were spoken in a low, muttered tone, they might as well have been shouted for the sheer intensity they carried.

Lark sat straighter in her seat. "Do not mistake me for a lamb, my lord. I can handle myself."

His forbidding expression didn't falter. "You don't know what you're saying."

"Yes, I do. You need irrefutable proof of their crimes. To get that, you must attend this upcoming sale, where you will finally have access to their operation. You said it yourself...you won't be allowed past their door without me."

"Absolutely not." This time, the words were shouted.

Lark forced herself to remain seated while the marquess turned to the fireplace and locked his hands behind his back. She looked again to Turner, hoping he might have something to say. But he simply stared back at her, his expression utterly neutral. Hale was even less helpful as he appeared to be watching the whole argument as some sort of entertainment.

With a frown, she returned her attention to the marquess. "You may not be able to stop me."

Warfield spun back to face her, his features hard as stone, his gaze sharp and fierce. "What does that mean?"

Lark took a breath. "It means I'll go on my own if I have to. You see, I happen to know the address where this exclusive little party is going to take place. I will slip past the guards and get inside that building with or without you."

The icy fury that shone from his pale gaze sent a sharp shiver down her spine and nearly froze her heart. Then he abruptly slid his gaze to Turner. "Could she do this?"

Lark was thankful he replied without hesitating. "Easily."

The depth of the marquess's stare reached straight to the center of her soul. Her heart ached for the turmoil she sensed in him. It was clear he hated the idea of putting her in danger, but he couldn't turn away from the opportunity to finally achieve the justice and vengeance he'd been craving.

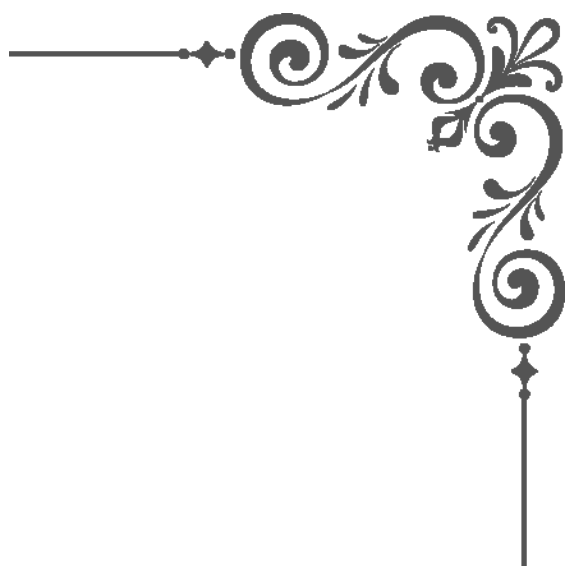
"Well, that decides it, I suppose," he muttered sharply. "I don't doubt for a second you'll do as you threaten, and I'd rather have you with me than on your own."

Turner spoke then in a tone of reason and assurance. "Trust me, my lord. We'll have securities of our own in place." He glanced at Hale. "Hale and I'll start on it tonight. There's a magistrate I've worked with a time or two who's proved himself to be a man who holds his responsibility to justice above any form of bribery or threat.

We present him with solid evidence of a crime, he'll ensure these men are properly punished under the laws of England."

The marquess was quiet for a moment as he focused solely on Lark. Then he said, "We've got only two days to plan this down to the tiniest detail. I won't leave a single thing up to chance. If you're to be a part of this," he added for her alone, "you'll do as I say and *only* as I say."

Lark nodded her agreement, feeling no regret at all for the lie.



Chapter Twenty- three

After they talked through a tentative plan and set up an intention to meet again the next day, the marquess saw his guests to the door while Lark slipped back into the passage to avoid having her presence at their meeting noted by any of the other servants.

They'd spent more than an hour discussing possible concerns while going through the expectations allowed by their limited knowledge of what they'd be facing. Throughout that time, Lark had felt a heavy weight of fear and worry growing inside her. It wasn't concern for her safety that had her ill at ease. She was confident in her abilities even if the marquess couldn't fully accept her choice to put herself in the thick of things. What truly bothered her as she went about her day was knowing how difficult their charade would be for the marquess.

Though he was fiercely determined to avenge his mother and see justice prevail against the men responsible for so many ruined lives, she knew what it cost him to act as though he were one of them. She couldn't stop thinking about what he'd said to her in her room. The raw torment in his voice when he'd said he didn't want to be like his father. Despite all evidence proving he was nothing like the prior marquess, it was clear he truly believed his father's sins had been passed on to him. His mother's hatred and vitriol had certainly contributed to such a belief and the shame he carried with him every day.

Using her in such a way—delivering her right into the mouth of the beast—was likely to cause significant torment. Despite assurances, he feared for her. But she believed he also feared for himself. Feared that in acting like his father—in essentially taking his place within the brotherhood—he'd be one step closer to *becoming* him.

It wasn't true. Could never be true. And she had to convince him of it. Before they went any further.

Once Lark reached her bedroom, she changed into her nightgown and robe as she did every night. Then she released her hair from the severely pinned style and brushed it out until it fell straight to her waist. After blowing out the candles, she curled up in one of the chairs before her fire and waited for the house to grow silent. Then she waited another hour after that.

Finally, she left her room without a candle to light her way and crept through the darkened house to the library. Closing the door behind her, she paused in the center of the cavernous room and listened. When she was fully certain no one was about, she approached the corner beside the fireplace and slipped through the hidden panel to the passage beyond. Though she moved through complete darkness, her steps were confident and sure. Unwavering in their destination.

When she reached the door to the lord's bedchamber, she paused again. Not out of hesitation, but to calm her suddenly racing heart. Deep breaths did nothing. In fact, the longer she stood there, on the cusp of everything she wanted, the more wildly her belly fluttered and her fingertips tingled in anticipation.

Lark had never been the type to prevaricate on anything. But this...this felt so much more important than anything she'd ever done. She had to do this right. She *needed* to do this so he understood the truth. But most of all, she wanted to do it. Because she wanted him. Desperately and with everything she was made of.

Extending her awareness, she heard nothing beyond the door. No breath nor movement. But she knew he was there. She sensed it in the frisson of heat across her nerves and in the bone-deep certainty of her choice.

Allowing a final shaky exhale, she triggered the lever that released the panel. It opened silently and she stepped into the candlelit room.

Her attention was instantly drawn to the marquess as he reclined in the oversized bathtub before a dancing fire. He faced away from her and didn't move when she secured the panel behind her. Taking advantage of the fact that he didn't yet know she was there, she allowed her gaze to travel softly over the strong lines of his shoulders and muscled arms where they rested along the curved rim of the tub.

As she started forward, slowly and silently, she noted that one of his legs was raised and also rested along the rim of the tub. She became momentarily fascinated by the shape of his foot. It was a finely shaped foot, masculine and elegant. Her gaze traveled over the strong bones of his ankle, then his muscled calf liberally dusted with black hair. The bend of his knee garnered a moment of admiration before her perusal continued along the column of his thigh to where it disappeared beneath the water.

The heady scent of his soap filled the room, infusing her body with warmth. And desire. Catching her bottom lip between her teeth, she couldn't help but imagine the parts of him she couldn't see. The broad planes of his chest and rippled belly. His narrow hips and there...between his thighs...

"Have you come to torment me?"

His darkly spoken words drew a quiet gasp from her lips.

Though she'd been carefully approaching him, she was still behind him and well outside his peripheral vision.

Had she made some noise?

As though hearing her thoughts, he said thickly, "No matter how silent you are, I always know when you're near. My body knows it. My very essence knows it. Knows *you*," he added in a raw murmur she wasn't entirely sure she was meant to hear.

"As I know you, my lord."

His chin dropped forward and he muttered something beneath his breath. Then he tipped his head back to rest on the edge of the tub and sighed. A rough sound that tore through Lark like the edge of a blade.

"You've come to my bedchamber in secrecy and silence. Perhaps you could bring yourself to call me Alastair."

Having stopped her progress when he spoke, Lark started forward again. Though she would have liked to stop there beside him—to reach out and smooth her hand along his arm or delve her fingers into the damp waves of his hair—she continued past him to the window across the room. Saying nothing, she stared up at the dark and clouded sky before pulling the drapes closed and turning to face him again. For some reason, she couldn't bring herself to meet his gaze. Not because she was having second thoughts but because she wasn't ready to see his denial and resistance.

So, she kept her gaze slightly lowered as she released the sash of her robe and allowed the unadorned garment to fall to the floor. Then she gently tugged at the ribbon tie that kept the neck of the nightgown from gaping and sliding off her shoulders.

"Lark."

Hearing her name spoken with such raw intensity in a tone that was both a warning and a plea sent a tremor of desire straight through her center.

And with it came a renewed confidence in this being more right and necessary than anything she'd ever done. More right than taking a tiny girl-child under her wing against every rule of survival she'd lived by. More right than leaving the freedom of the rookery for the girls' asylum. Even more right than taking a position in the household of a mysterious lord so she could be closer to where her friend had disappeared.

This was right in a way that was intrinsic to her very soul.

Courage and a deep feeling of empowerment surged through her as she walked slowly toward him. Her fingers were deft as she released the ribbon tie and her nightgown loosened to slip down one shoulder.

Tentatively lifting her gaze, she watched as his intense focus

faltered and his attention fell to her bared collarbone and then lower. His eyes burned, as though he could see through the cotton of her gown to her body beneath. When she came to a slow stop at the foot of the tub, his eyelids lowered to shutter his gaze and his tongue rolled out to wet his lips. Every nerve ending she possessed sang with heady anticipation.

Though she was intensely tempted to soak in the sight of his full form under the wavering surface of the water, when she looked into his eyes, she became utterly enthralled.

By the subtle flicker of uncertainty and vulnerability she saw there. By the pain he tried desperately to conceal. And by the heavy, intoxicating mixture of lust and longing that burned bright in the crystalline blue of his stare.

"If you've come to torture me," he muttered in a gravelly whisper, "please just kill me now."

Her insides twisted with a delicious rush of heat and awareness that settled between her legs. With a subtle shimmy of her shoulders, her nightgown lost its mooring and dropped to her feet.

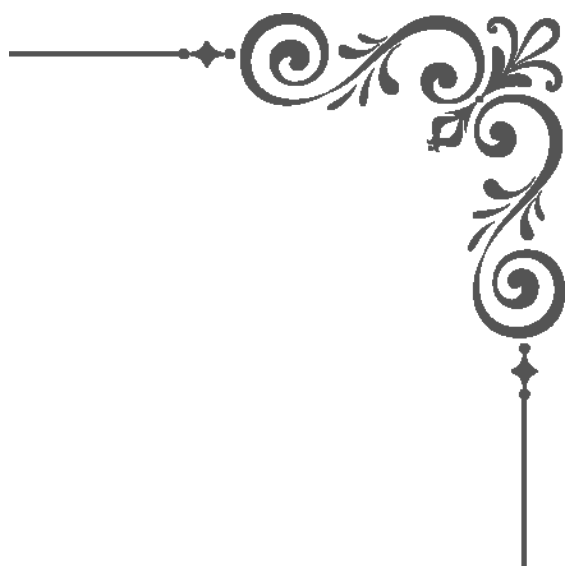
"I want no more pain or torment or denial between us." Her voice was calm and steady despite the trembling that had taken control of her body. "I want only the truth and offer the same. I want you, Alastair...I want to be with you. More than I've wanted anything in my life." It was on the tip of her tongue to say more, but she swallowed the words she struggled to fully believe and said something she absolutely knew to be true. "I need you. Tonight. Now."

The words hovered in the quiet heavy atmosphere of the room while he stared at her. Tension was evident on every line of his face and infused every muscle in his body.

But she wasn't deterred.

She could see how badly he wanted her. His desire was a physical heat that drew her. And as she stood there, confident and patient, she watched a lifetime of resistance slowly sliding away from him. Finally, with a fierce light burning in his gaze, he lowered his foot into the water and pushed himself to a more upright position in the tub. Then he lifted a hand and turned it palm up.

"Join me."



Chapter Twenty-four

With her heart filling her throat and her body nearly shaking with need, Lark stepped forward and placed her hand in his. The warmth and assurance of his fingers curling around hers calmed her. He wasn't going to send her away. He wasn't going to berate her for her boldness or deny the hunger between them.

Instead, he drew her closer.

Without words, he urged her to step into the tub. She settled herself between his bent knees and leaned back against the opposite end of the deep basin with her knees drawn in toward her chest to keep from crowding him in the limited space.

"Relax," he murmured.

As she forced her body to soften into the silky warmth of the water, he set her hand on the edge of the tub. Then he reached beneath the water. Her breath caught on a gasp when she felt his long fingers wrapping around her ankles. Though she struggled to ascertain what he intended, she offered no resistance as he lifted her feet to set them against his chest.

His grip shifted and he ran his strong thumbs along the tender arches of her soles. She issued a heavy sigh and closed her eyes.

She might've heard a rough chuckle rumble from his chest, but the sensations he invoked with the deft work of his fingers on the most sensitive areas of her feet and toes prevented her from taking a peek to verify. She'd already become lost in the pleasure of it. The delicate dance of his fingertips. The perfect pressure and almost intuitive attention to particularly sensitive points. He seemed to know each secret spot that would spark a rush of pleasure along every nerve in her body. To a woman who spent every day on her feet, walking back and forth across hard floors and up and down stairs, that he would put so much care and attention into easing the constant soreness she'd come to expect each day was touching in a way she couldn't have anticipated.

She felt cherished and cared for. She'd never felt such things before.

Her body was utterly languid and soft by the time his hands circled up around her calves, gently kneading there before guiding her feet around his hips. Lark opened her eyes as she was opened to him, but it was a heavy gaze that met hers and held as he reached forward

and palmed her hips to slowly draw her closer between his spread knees. She parted her lips on a short, staccato inhale as her legs settled over the hair-textured surface of his thighs and her knees pressed to either side of his rib cage. Her hands fell to the hard planes of his chest, flattening against the heat of his skin.

It was a deeply intimate position, but she knew it could go further. A sweet, desperate ache settled low in her body. Between her thighs where he'd kissed her so passionately.

Still saying nothing, he smoothed his hand up her back, gently pressing his fingertips into the muscles along her spine, which inspired another sigh of pleasure. He found the deep tension she tended to carry in her shoulders and worked magic into her muscles until they softened and relaxed. When he slipped his hand beneath the fall of her hair to squeeze the tight cords running up the back of her neck to her skull, a breathy moan slipped from her throat.

He was mesmerizing her. Awakening her to every delicate variation of his touch. He was transforming her from a body made for labor and survival to one existing solely for pleasure and sensation.

She didn't know when her eyes had fallen closed again, but when she opened them, it was to discover that she was closer to him than she'd realized. Her hands had moved up to mindlessly knead the muscles of his shoulders, and her mouth was barely inches from his. Blinking to clear the luxurious haze from her brain, she looked into eyes of tumultuous blue. A sea of light and shadow, lit by the fires of his desire. His hunger and need.

Her body tightened. Deep inside.

As she parted her lips, words urging him to kiss her already rising from her throat, his expression shifted. His jaw muscles tensed and bunched at the corners, his gorgeous lips became hard, and his gaze shuttered.

"I told you to keep your distance." His voice was thick and raw.

Lark couldn't prevent the corner of her mouth from curling upward. "It would appear I didn't listen."

"Impertinent," he muttered with a scowl.

She smiled. But his features didn't soften. Even as he combed his fingers through her hair from scalp to tip, sending tingling chills across the surface of her skin, he glowered. With a sigh, she lifted her hands from his shoulders to frame his face. Staring intently into his eyes, she spoke in a firm and steady voice. "I want this. I want you, Alastair. From the moment I sat across from you in your study, I've known it would come to this. To us."

Though she doubted he realized it, his hand fisted in her hair, tugging sweetly on her scalp, as his expression darkened into something resembling anger.

“How could you want a man like me? I’m—”

She interrupted him with a firm press of her fingers to his lips. She could feel the tug of a scowl weighing her own brow as she spoke intently, hoping to break through his false beliefs. “Stop. You’re not like your father. You’re not. I’ve encountered enough bad men in my life to know a good one.” She lowered her fingers from his mouth and pressed her palm to his chest, covering the hard beat of his heart. “You’re a good man, Alastair. Noble and strong and *good*. What your father did to your mother was unconscionable. But his wickedness and her anguished hatred do not belong to you.”

There was a long and potent silence as they stared at each other. Their breath mingled in the narrow space between them, and slowly his fist relaxed in her hair and he slid his palm down the curve of her spine. When she shivered, in part due to the sensations he roused and partly due to the cooling water of the bath, he made a soft sound and pulled her close into his arms as he abruptly rose to his feet.

The rush of cooler air against her wet skin drew a sharp gasp as she tightened her legs around his hips and her arms around his neck. In doing so, she couldn’t ignore the hot length of his erection against her low belly, and she shivered again.

He made another rough sound, much like a groan of pain as he loosened his hold and urged her feet to the thick rug spread between the tub and fireplace. Bending forward, he grabbed the towel that had been set in wait for him. He immediately brought it around her, encircling her in the soft, thick flannel. She lifted her arms as he doubled the towel over her breasts and tucked the end to hold it secure. Then he stepped toward her and pulled her back into his arms, as though he couldn’t stand to have her so far away even for a moment.

She sighed and draped her arms around his neck, tipping her face up to his.

And with the fire heating her back and his damp, naked body warming her front, he finally lowered his head. And with the fierce flames of desire dancing in his gaze, he kissed her.

Deep. Heavy. Possessive.

He claimed her with that kiss. Branded her. Consumed her.

And she did the same. Holding him tight against her, she claimed his kiss with every ounce of her need. Every bit of longing she’d been harboring. Rising to her toes, she slid one hand through the hair at his nape to palm his skull, urging the kiss to go deeper. Some deep, dark part of her wanted to bend him to her will—to demand more from him—even as she instinctively craved the pleasure she suspected could only be found in surrender.

As her inner conflict grew, he seemed to sense her turmoil.

Thrusting his tongue deep into her mouth, he breathed in her heady moan as he swept his arm beneath her legs and lifted her into his arms. A few long strides carried her to his bed, where he laid her down atop the rich black velvet coverlet. Her next breath was a long sigh of pleasure as he settled his full weight atop her. One hard thigh pressed between her legs, his broad chest flattened her breasts, and his arousal burned against her hip. The heavy heat of him pressed her into the mattress until all she knew was the sensation of his body against hers. His hardness against her softness. His passion melding with hers.

Though she loved the way his tongue twirled erotically with hers and his teeth occasionally scraped the swollen fullness of her lips, she discovered a new delight when he slid his mouth down the side of her neck. He teased her with delicate flicks of his tongue, then nipped the muscle that sloped to her shoulder with the edge of his teeth. A new restlessness entered her body, lighting up her nerves and creating a deep arch in her spine.

He hummed his approval and trailed his lips lower, brushing her collarbone, until he encountered the edge of the towel. With another low sound—this one a growl of frustration—he roughly tugged at the cloth binding her. Obeying his command, the flannel fell away from her body, exposing her breasts to his bright gaze. And his ravenous mouth.

The first harsh pull of his mouth on her breast startled her, drawing a swift gasp that slid into a moan as he swirled his tongue around her peaked nipple. She'd never imagined such a deep drawing sensation. The pleasure inspired by his expert lips and tongue on her breast angled acutely through her core to the heated, aching flesh between her legs. But before she could even ask for something she couldn't name, he knew what she needed. As his attention shifted to the other breast, he began a strong, rhythmic press of his thigh between hers. The firm pressure right where she craved it sent pleasure spiraling through her body. She strained against him, rolling her hips, seeking more.

With a ragged groan, he brought his mouth back to hers for a wet, gasping kiss. Grasping her waist with one hand, he seemed to be trying to still her almost frantic movements, but she couldn't understand why. Sensations surged within her, needing an outlet. She strained harder beneath him. Needing more, not less.

Finally, the gentle whispered hush of his voice broke through her rioting senses. "Shh, my sweet angel. I'm here. I'll give you what you need." The soothing promise in his dark voice softened the edge of hunger raging inside her, and she slowly calmed. "That's it," he murmured appreciatively. "You're all mine until you experience every

bit of pleasure I can conjure. But there's no rush. I've finally got you in my bed and I won't be letting you out anytime soon."

Dipping his head to nip at her earlobe, he slid his hand up to cover her breast and she sighed. With the flat of his thumb, he lightly circled her nipple. Once. Twice. But when she tried to press herself more fully into his hand, he abruptly released her breast to wrap his hand around the side of her neck and pressed his thumb beneath her chin. Gently but firmly, he urged her head back, until her chin tilted toward the ceiling and her throat was fully exposed.

As he closed his mouth over the pulse at the side of her neck and sucked her flesh in against his teeth, he reached down between their bodies. Shifting to lie beside her, he replaced the hard press of his thigh with the intricate glide of his fingertips. She hadn't realized how wet she'd gotten until she felt the ease with which his touch slid along her sensitive folds.

His hot moan bathed her throat and his erection pulsed against her hip.

Lark's inner muscles clenched tightly in a fierce attempt to assuage the hollow ache inside her. The action sent a ripple of pleasure through her, so she did it again. But this time, his broad finger was there, pressing firmly to her opening. The squeeze of her muscles seemed to draw him inside her. She moaned, lifting her hips as he delved deeper, filling her. Answering the call of her body that demanded he ease the relentless aching he'd created.

Knowing what she needed before she could put the feeling into thought, he began a languid thrusting of his finger, then two. In and out of her body. Caressing and stimulating the sensitive channel until she was mindless with the rise of pleasure.

Her fingernails clawed at his shoulders. Her mouth sought his and she devoured his kisses with desperate hunger. And just when she thought she couldn't take another moment of the wonderful torment, he shifted again. Lowering his hips between her thighs, he urged her legs wide to accept him. As soon as his fingers withdrew from her heat, they were replaced by the smooth, blunt head of his erection. Positioning himself against her, he leveraged himself up on his elbows and framed her face in his hands.

Staring intently, fiercely into her eyes, he pressed forward.

The burning stretch of her body as it struggled to accommodate him was pleasurable in its own way, and she reveled in it. Revelled in the feeling of being claimed by him. Of taking him into her body and claiming *him*, as well. She lifted her knees and tilted her hips, silently urging him farther. Farther. Until he filled her completely.

Then she released her held breath on a sigh of relief and wonder. They were joined.

And it felt more right—more perfect—than anything she'd ever known.

She searched his features in the dark, hoping he felt the same. Hoping he knew as she knew.

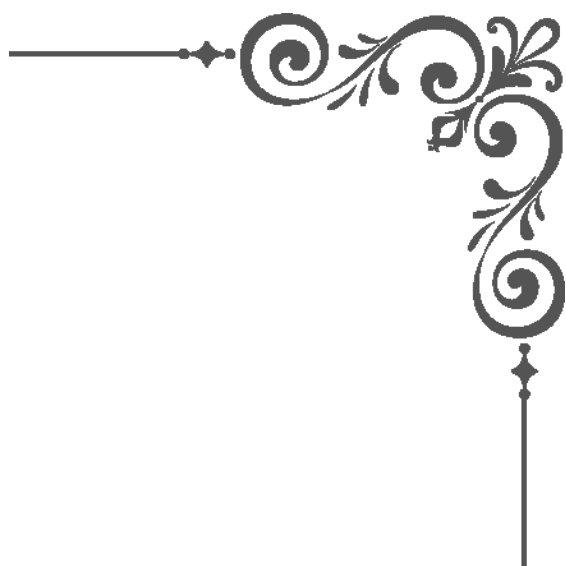
But the fire had burned low and the shadows had grown too deep. All she could see were harsh angles and tense lines.

And then he began to move. Slowly. Carefully. Tenderly. Long, torturous thrusts. Then, as the passion built, shorter, deeper pumps of his hips that rocked her into the mattress as she arched and gasped and moaned.

Sweat beaded on his skin and her hands slid helplessly up and down his back. Grasping his buttocks, then clutching at his shoulders. The frantic rise of pleasure inside her kept building until she feared the wave might never break—never offer that sweet, breath-stealing release.

But all it took was the press of his fingertip over the pulsing bud of her sex and she exploded around him. Her flesh trembled and pulsed as ripples of pleasure spread out to every nerve, leaving her shaking and gasping. She barely came back to her senses in time to feel him tense from head to toe. With a rough groan, he pulled himself free of her body. His head dropped beside hers, and his mouth closed over the muscle of her shoulder as his hot seed spilled against her belly.

Then with a final shudder, he heaved himself to the side, sprawling heavily onto his back.



Chapter Twenty-five

H*oly blasted hell.*

Alastair stared at the ceiling, breathing deeply to dispel the spinning stars from his vision. He'd never experienced anything so...intense. So bloody mind-melting.

He angled his gaze toward the woman beside him. The pale form of her lovely naked body was sprawled much as his. Her blonde hair was spread in a tangled mess over his pillows, and her breasts rose and fell with her heavy breath.

Though he felt shaken and weak, he used the discarded towel to wipe his issue from her belly and himself. Then he stretched out on his side, cushioning his head on his bent arm while reaching for her with the other. He couldn't *not* touch her. Settling his hand on her abdomen, just below the curves of her breasts, he monitored her deep inhales and shaky exhales until they slowed to a steadier pace. Then he began a gentle exploration with his fingertips and the brush of his knuckles. He memorized the angle of her collarbone, the shallow dish of her sternum, then the soft curve of her belly.

She kept her eyes closed throughout and lay unmoving as gooseflesh rose on her skin. He suspected she might have fallen asleep, but he couldn't bring himself to stop the slow caress. When he slipped his fingers along her side, measuring the sloping curve of her waist and hip, she gave a little start.

Ticklish?

He swept his fingers lightly up to her underarm, and she made a soft sound of protest then curled up and rolled to face him. His hand fell to her hip as his eyes met hers. It was a languid, sated gaze that instantly triggered a rushing need to protect and keep this woman. Giving in to impulse, he pulled her closer. She responded by uncurling her limbs to slide one slim leg over his as she slipped a hand over his rib cage to press against his back. Then she tipped her face to his and pressed a kiss to the underside of his jaw before she nuzzled her face in the curve of his neck.

Within another breathless moment, she was asleep.

He knew it this time by the deep, rhythmic flow of her breath and the relaxed weight of her limbs across his body.

Though his sensual need had been satiated by the greatest pleasure he'd ever known, his thoughts were restless and troubling. In the quiet

sanctuary of his bed, with Lark wrapped so trustingly in his arms, he analyzed the truths of his life. Those he'd inherited from his ill-fated parents and those he'd formed while traveling—running from his origins. He thought over the words Lark had spoken this very night. Her assurance and confidence. Her steadfast faith in him.

Just recalling the conviction in her dark gray eyes made his chest tighten. But he didn't know if it was from acceptance or denial. Didn't know if he could ever see himself as she did. Not after so many years of believing himself to be tainted past any personal redemption.

But wasn't that exactly what this quest against the brotherhood was all about? It was based on a need for justice and vengeance, but wasn't it also a battle to redeem his own soul? To prove himself to be in direct opposition to everything his father stood for?

And yet he was going to willingly and knowingly bring Lark into their depraved circle. That in itself was proof that he wasn't a man of honor. He was but a villain with a noble purpose. And after this was all over, the noble purpose would be no more.

And where would that leave him?

He didn't realize that his dark thoughts had been translating through his muscles and bones until the woman in his arms squirmed in protest at his tightening hold. He immediately relaxed but it was too late. Her eyelashes fluttered against his skin as she shifted and stretched against him.

The sinuous movement scattered his focus, leaving only one thought behind. One need. One primitive desire.

Palming her rear, he rolled to his back, bringing her with him to sprawl atop his prone form. Her thighs fell open over his hips, and her breasts plumped against his chest as she tried to lift herself to her elbows. Alastair refused to allow it and grasped her wrists in his hands before stretching them up over his head. Though she lay on top, she was effectively his captive.

And by the light flickering intently in her eyes, she was not opposed to the partially submissive position. She trailed her desirous gaze over his features, and the softness in her expression made his heart stutter. But when her tongue swept over her bottom lip, that tender organ stopped dead.

With a ragged groan, he lifted his head and claimed that glistening bottom lip with his teeth, tugging it gently before drawing it into his mouth. She responded by tilting her head and opening her mouth to him. Their tongues danced wildly about, seeking, tasting, claiming.

Releasing her wrists, he reached down to grab her hips. Then he moved her against his hardening length. Just a gentle rocking at first. But as her breath shortened with renewed passion and she adjusted her position to tuck her knees up along his sides, he lost control. His

grip tightened and he moved her hips in a punishing rhythm. The heat and wetness of her sex slid with erotic torment along his erection, bringing him shockingly close to climax before he issued a harsh groan and stopped the blissful torture by holding her still atop him.

But she would not be denied.

Pressing her hands to his shoulders, she rose up to sit straddling his hips. The sight was simple perfection. The modest curve of her hips was accentuated by her spread thighs cradling his body between them. Her slim torso met the gentle swell of her breasts, tipped with dusky, plump nipples that begged for his tongue. And her shoulders held a proud angle, as did her chin as she looked down at him from beneath a sultry sweep of lashes.

"I'm entirely at your mercy." The words were thick and raw. They slid from his lips unbidden. He hadn't meant to confess such an intimate and vulnerable truth. But when her lips curled into a naughty little smile and anticipation flared in her gaze, he decided the reward might be worth the risk.

"I was hoping you'd say that," she whispered huskily.

A soft hum rolled in her throat as she smoothed her hands over his chest before reaching along his arms, gently forcing them up over his head in a position similar to the one he'd used on her. Except this time, her hands were free to explore.

And she did.

Brushing her fingertips first over the tension in his brow, then down the slope of his nose to his lips. She seemed inordinately fascinated by the shape of his mouth as she traced the outline before using her thumb to draw his lower lip down. Then she leaned forward to slip her tongue past his teeth in a quick, teasing taste.

His groan was half growl as she rose again, leaving him hungering for a deeper mating. But she wasn't nearly finished with her exploration.

Her fingertips drifted next to the pulse at the base of his throat, then down to circle one flat nipple before scraping the edge of her nail over the other. The hiss of his breath at the sensation drew another smile to her lips and inspired her to test his endurance further.

Using only her fingernails now, she softly scratched down the center of his abdomen to where the swollen head of his erection lay against his belly. He tensed from head to toe, closing his eyes and holding his breath as he anticipated the delicate scrape of her fingernail across his sensitive tip.

Still, he was unprepared for it when it came. The intricate dance of pleasure and pain shocked his nerves, jolting his system, causing his hips to buck beneath her. And that caused a moment of gorgeous friction between their intimate flesh.

Her gasp mingled with his groan as he fought the urge to reach for her. To roll her beneath him and plunge into her.

Rising up on her knees, she lifted her weight from his groin. For a moment, he thought she might leave him and he took a ragged breath to protest. But she was just repositioning herself lower on his thighs.

He opened his eyes to see her staring down at him with a look of wonder and lust.

His cock throbbed in response, bumping against his belly and drawing a soft hum from her throat.

She reached for him then, encircling him in the warmth of her touch. Her thumbs explored the shape of his ridged tip before her grip tightened and slid down to his base. Gentle fingers cupped his balls then trailed up and down his length, learning the shape of him, testing his weight.

And as she stared intently at what she was doing to his body, he stared intently at her face. The fascination and rising passion displayed in her features, the increasing breathlessness and longing in her gaze had him nearly exploding in her hands. He clenched his teeth and fisted his hands in the pillow above his head. He arched his neck and breathed harshly through his nose.

But all the while he watched her. He couldn't stop soaking in the pleasure she received from touching him. Exploring and discovering him.

Until it finally got to be too much.

At the end of his endurance, he grasped her hands and brought them to his mouth, kissing her fingertips and palms. Then he set her hands to the bed on either side of his head while he reached down between them. With one hand grasping her buttock, he pulled her closer while he positioned himself with his other hand.

On a rough and ragged sigh, he pushed up into her body while she shivered and trembled above him. Once he was fully sheathed within her, she began to move. Learning how to take her pleasure of him while bestowing the same with uninhibited sensuality.

They remained wrapped in each other, soaked in passion through the night. Neither of them speaking of what had come before or what would come after. Their whispered, murmured words were only of the moment. Of longing and need. Of pleasure and acceptance.

But dawn came as it always did. And with the first sliver of gray to peek around the heavy drapes, Alastair felt an intense stab of loss—and painful regret. He'd awoken from a brief and sated slumber to find himself alone. There had been no noise to tell him so, no hint of movement lingering in the room, but he knew with intuitive certainty that Lark had only just left him.

It had been the very simple, distinct, and undeniable lack of her

presence that had startled him awake.



LARK RUSHED THROUGH the passage back to the library. She needed to sneak back to her bedroom before the first maids began to stir, which was likely to be at any moment.

She couldn't allow her thoughts to settle for even a moment on the night of absolute bliss and revelation she'd spent with the marquess.

Alastair.

His name still felt strange on her tongue and in her mind.

Strange but exhilarating. Strange but luminous. Strange but perfect.

A small vulnerable part of her was glad she'd managed to slip away while he'd still slept. She didn't want to look into his eyes under the harsh light of day and witness the moment he was overtaken by remorse. She didn't want to see his features harden with self-reproach after she'd memorized how he'd looked at the height of passion and contentment. He might even hate her for approaching him as she did—practically forcing his hand while he'd been exposed and vulnerable.

Her cheeks burned but she refused to regret a single moment.

Of course, he'd likely be desperate to pretend the experience had never happened. Or perhaps he'd convince himself it had happened in a dream, never to be discussed in the full light of day. Without a doubt, he'd tell himself the experience could never be repeated. She'd known these things before she'd gone to his room last night. Had known they were a likelihood if she managed to convince him to accept her, even if just for the night. But it didn't make it easier to bear. In truth, the knowledge that she'd only ever have that one night with him twisted inside her as though someone were wringing out her very heart.

So, she blocked such concerns from her mind, thinking only of her tasks for the day. Making it to her room without incident, she quickly bathed with water she poured into the wash bowl behind the screen. As she washed away the lingering scent of him from her skin, she didn't allow herself the luxury of emotion, though it tried to choke her.

Within fifteen minutes, she was properly dressed and ready to meet with her staff as she did every morning before they began their chores. Then she was off to the kitchen to discuss the day's meals with Mrs. Reynard. Then a quick meeting with Gideon over a shared concern about the state of the gardens.

By the time the marquess called for his tea some hours later, she'd managed to tuck the most potent memories so far into the back of her

thoughts that she no longer experienced a shiver along her nerves or a melting in her center whenever she thought of the man upstairs and the night they'd shared.

She readied the tea tray as she always did and carried it to the breakfast room. She did her best not to focus on his dark form at the end of the table, framed by the light of full day flooding in from the window behind him.

Setting the tray on the table, she looked up briefly to ask, "Shall I pour?"

She thought she'd be all right. She really did. But that brief glance into his intense blue eyes nearly broke her.

Icy no more, his gaze bored into her with heat and fire and passion. And promise.

Her breath caught. Her knees almost buckled. Her heart quite literally stopped.

Rather than answering as he always did, the marquess rose purposefully to his feet. He didn't approach her as she half feared, half craved he would do. Instead, he walked around the table to the door. Lark stood absolutely frozen in place, not knowing at all what he was about or what he was thinking or what she should do. Her gaze fell to the tea tray a moment before she heard the sharp click of the door shutting them into the room alone.

Within another breath, his arms were around her. One hand squeezed the back of her neck while the other arm encircled her waist as he turned her to face him. She caught just a flashing impression of his intent and handsome features before his mouth took hers.

Despite her surprise and confusion, her body knew exactly what to do as she softened and melted against him. His tongue swept into her mouth, claiming and demanding the most intimate taste of her as his hips pressed to hers until her buttocks came up against the edge of the table behind her.

Just as she began to get past her shock and engage in the wonderful passion of his kiss, he pulled back with a raw muttered curse.

Lark gasped for breath and looked up at him, her vision already going starry from desire and longing.

"Now, there'll be no denying it," he muttered. His voice was thick as his focus swept fiercely over her face. "I'm a blackguard of the worst sort. And I can't even seem to care."

Lark prepared to argue with him, but before she could, he kissed her again. And the flames which had been carefully tamped over the last few hours engulfed her once more.

She pulled him to her with a heavy sigh, wrapping her arms around his neck and lifting to her toes in an attempt to get closer. To

feel more of him. To claim him as he claimed her.

When he grasped her hips and set her on the table, relief flooded her body. When he shifted his hold to cover her breast as his lips teased the sensitive curves of her ear, she feared she'd never feel as though she could get enough of him.

But when he broke the kiss once again, she could see by the blue fire of his gaze that one night was no more enough for him than it was for her.

Lowering his head, he rested his forehead to hers while the panting breaths mingled between their lips.

"Don't ever sneak away from me like that again." The raw huskiness of his voice curled through her like the potent smoke of opium dens. Winding through her senses, creating a haze of languid anticipation in her mind. Because his words implied she would spend more nights in his bed. In his arms. Against his heart.

"I had duties—"

His growl stopped her words. As did the flash of some unnamed emotion in his gaze. "That'll be addressed at the earliest opportunity. But for now"—he sighed heavily and slowly began to release her—"we've something to discuss."

Lark's entire being protested his withdrawal. But when he placed her back on her feet, she locked her knees and forced herself to stand strong on her own.

"Please. Sit." The marquess gestured to one of the chairs at the table as he stepped stiffly around her to retake his seat. She suspected his obvious physical tension was due to the desire running rampant through his body as it was hers, and it gave her some comfort and pleasure to know she was not alone in her torment.

But taking a seat at the table with him...

"Breakfast will be delivered shortly. Perhaps it would be best for me to just serve your tea."

He was still standing beside his chair as he waited for her to do as he'd instructed, and the dark look he gave her reminded her of the lord she'd met that first day.

Lark sat down.

As he took his chair, he nodded to the tray. "Help yourself to some tea if you'd like."

Uncertain with his odd and unprecedented manner, Lark served him first, preparing it how he liked without even having to think about it. Then she readied herself a cup.

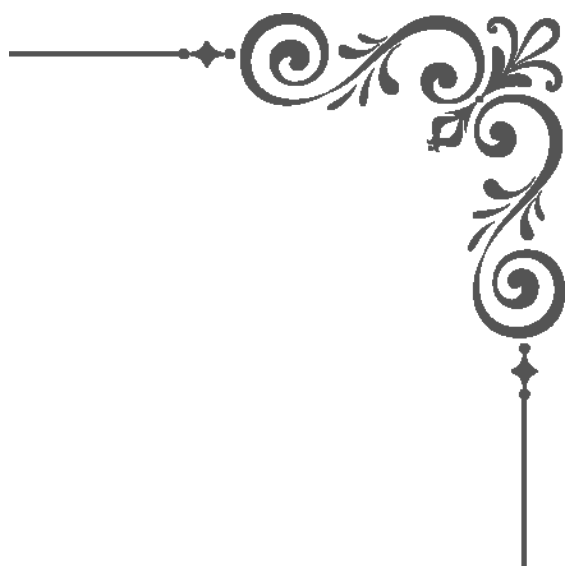
"I've received a message from Lowndes."

Lark paused in the act of bringing her teacup to her lips for a scalding sip to look at him with wide eyes. "You did?" she asked cautiously.

He nodded. "It contained a few more detailed instructions for tomorrow night along with a small package." Reaching into his coat pocket, he withdrew a tiny glass vial, which he set on the table between them. His features were hard as stone. "He assures this will make my chosen guest for the evening more...*receptive* to my plans." His gaze found hers. "There's still time to call this off."

"No." She returned his stare with steady assurance. "We can do this."

His eyes darkened as he looked at her across the table, but he did not reply.



Chapter Twenty-six

The next night, Lark readied herself for the evening ahead with the help of Turner's gorgeous wife. Lark couldn't imagine what she might need help with—her preparations for the evening were rather straightforward. But as soon as the elegant young lady swept into the house with her sparkling smile, stunning silver gaze, and infectious energy, Lark yielded to the force that was Portia Turner.

Once they were ensconced in Lark's small bedroom, the other woman gave her a wink as she swept her cloak from her shoulders in a dramatic swirl. "The men can discuss the details of this evening to death if they want. In my experience, intuition and instinct can often get me greater results than a well-memorized plan."

Lark was tempted to agree. And they'd already gone over everything a dozen times. She knew what she had to do. Perhaps even better than the marquess or Turner could.

"Can I get you anything, Mrs. Turner? Tea?" She paused. "A little scotch, perhaps?"

A wide smile brightened the lady's face. "Portia, please. And scotch would be lovely. I knew as soon as Dell told me about you that we'd get along famously."

She took a seat in one of the armchairs while Lark fetched the teacups and the bottle hidden in her desk. When Lark took the opposite seat and poured the potent liquor into the delicate china, Portia laughed, a husky, feminine sound.

"Thank you. I understand you led a rather adventurous life in your early youth."

Lark met the other lady's bright gaze with a slightly questioning gaze. "If you're referencing the fact that I lived amongst a gang of thieves and stole for my survival, I suppose you're correct."

"Dammit." Portia's expression darkened with earnest regret. "I'm so sorry, Mrs. Evans. You must think me horribly dense. I'm frequently reminded that my own privileged life has given me a skewed perspective when it comes to such things. I swear I didn't mean to minimize the horrendous difficulties you faced. I wished only to celebrate how you persevered and fought against your limitations with your cleverness and skill."

The lady glanced to the side with a shrug. "Before I met Dell, I feared I might never know my own mettle simply because I'd never

had an opportunity to test myself. I'd always suspected I was meant for more than my social standing allowed. Just as I had a sense, when Dell told me about you, that you too refused to accept the limitations of your circumstance. And you worked hard for your liberation, didn't you?"

Lark had never actually thought of it that way. "I suppose I did."

"And that's why I felt we might better prepare for tonight away from our gentlemen's scowling visages and their repeated insistence upon protections and securities and sticking to the letter of the plan. The truth is," Portia whispered dramatically as she leaned forward, "sometimes, *my* plans for a job don't exactly match up with my husband's. I find it best to go along with his dictates until I simply cannot. Impulse is not always a bad thing, and sometimes it is not only good to break from the plan but absolutely necessary."

"I'm curious what Turner thinks of such an approach." From what she remembered of his methods back in Covent Garden, he was a rather meticulous and organized sort.

Portia smiled, undaunted by the query. "Despite the fact they're not how he would do things and as long as I'm not unnecessarily reckless, Dell has come to appreciate and respect my methods simply because they tend to work."

Lark smiled. It was impossible not to like such a shamelessly confident woman.

"So," Portia continued after taking a long sip from her teacup, "in order to determine how best I might assist and support you, why don't you tell me what *your* strategies are for this evening?"



NEARLY TWO HOURS LATER, Lark sat beside Alastair in the dark of a nondescript carriage as they rolled along the perfect lanes of Mayfair. The vehicle had arrived exactly at the expected time. And even though the driver and accompanying groom had averted their eyes when Alastair emerged from the house carrying a seemingly unconscious Lark, they made sure to begin their ruse immediately.

Once they were ensconced in the carriage and it began to move, Lark straightened her slumped posture, but she didn't move away from where Alastair had settled her close against his side. Beneath an enveloping cloak, she wore a blood-red evening gown borrowed from Portia. It had been specially designed by the lady herself and was finer than anything Lark had ever worn. The soft cotton cravat which had been fashioned into a gag and was currently looped loosely around Lark's neck smelled subtly of the marquess. Oddly—or perhaps not—it gave her comfort and confidence. Her wrists were tied in front of her with another cravat.

Turner had demonstrated several times how the knots he'd employed could easily be released with one simple move. He and Alastair had both insisted Lark practice over and over until she could manage the maneuver without even a hint of difficulty.

She glanced aside at the marquess. His posture was stiff and unyielding, and his profile showed the deep intensity of his discomfort. On impulse, Lark reached for his hand where it pressed firmly to the top of his thigh.

"This will work. I've no doubt."

He turned to look at her as he adjusted his hand to link his fingers through hers despite the cloth binding her wrists. His eyes blazed bright in the darkness.

"If anything goes wrong tonight, anything at all"—his grip tightened on her fingers—"your only priority is to flee. Immediately. Do you understand?"

Lark nodded, implying her agreement. He was afraid for her, and there was nothing she could say to convince him that she'd be all right. But the truth of the matter was she had no intention of fleeing until they accomplished what they set out to do.

It was the only way he'd finally feel free from his past. From the pain. From his father's twisted legacy.

The marquess leaned toward her, lifting his other hand to cup the side of her face and turn her mouth toward his. "I won't allow them to hurt you," he whispered gravely. "I swear on everything I am that you'll not be harmed. By them or anyone."

"Don't worry about me. Your task is dangerous enough tonight. Please," she whispered, "trust me to do my part."

Her chest tightened as he kissed her. Because this wasn't a kiss of passion and undeniable hunger. This was far gentler and quieter. It felt as though he were trying to communicate something that had no words.

Too soon, the views outside the carriage window changed as they left the orderly streets of Mayfair behind. The farther they went, the more dark and twisted the lanes became and the more people could be seen out and about.

Lark knew the moment they entered Covent Garden. She took a deep breath as memories of her childhood flooded through her. Though it had been years since she'd left, the old neighborhood still felt like home in a way. There was a different energy here than anywhere else. Most visitors just saw the barely disguised desperation of the lower-class inhabitants. They failed to see the true strength of such a place. The cleverness and ingenuity. The found families and the depth of community that could be found in the unlikeliest of places. It was rough and harsh and dangerous. But it was beautiful, too.

And it was here, in the warrens she'd once called home, that they'd find Dryden's marketplace, where innocent women were brought to be sold to men of noble prestige and wealth. It was surprising that men of such affluence would choose such a foreign world in which to conduct their play.

Then again, perhaps not.

In their arrogance, they no doubt considered the location a perfect setting for their particular depravities. Away from the watchful eyes of the rest of the ton. Where they could readily find people willing to do a great number of things for the right coin. People to use and exploit for their pleasures. Where they could exert their assumed limitless power without anyone to gainsay them.

As the carriage began to slow, Lark took a deep breath. Calming any riotous nerves. Focusing on the task ahead. Visualizing their success. And Alastair's ultimate freedom.

Then she turned to the stoic man beside her. "It's time."

He didn't move at first. But then he made a low sound in his throat and released her hands to reach for the gag looped beneath her chin. Holding her gaze, he lifted the gag into place. Since it had to fit tightly to appear legitimate and so it wouldn't slip, the cotton spread her lips painfully, forcing her to breathe deeply through her nose.

The marquess scowled darkly. "Is it too tight? Are you all right?"

She nodded without hesitation and muttered a guttural assurance, but he didn't look satisfied. When he reached for the knot at the back of her head, Lark jerked away from him and gave a sharp shake of her head.

He cast her a dark look, but then the carriage came to a full stop. Cursing beneath his breath, he swiftly pulled the hood of her cloak over her head. She just managed to close her eyes and slump heavily against his side before the carriage door was opened.

"Come along, love," he murmured seductively for the benefit of those who might overhear as he shifted her into the circle of his arms. "We've arrived."

Lark issued a soft sound but continued to move slowly and with difficulty.

Turner was able to determine that the vial sent by Lowndes contained a drug intended to only partially incapacitate one who ingested it. The effects would not last long. Just long enough, it was assumed, to get a victim into a more secure location where any potential struggles and screams would not be heeded.

As a young pickpocket, Lark had employed various charades and ruses to distract a target or to lure someone into a trap where they could be fleeced by her comrades. The current act was simple enough. It was Alastair who'd need to carry the bulk of the weight in their

ruse. Figuratively and literally, she realized as he eased her sagging form from the carriage then swiftly lifted her into his arms.

She almost smiled at his determination to keep her within the circle of his protection. For now, she'd allow it. But she knew, even if he didn't, that such consideration likely wouldn't last much longer.

Turner's associates had long ago been dispatched to the location to keep watch and be on hand when the time came. Turner, Portia, and Hale should all be crouched in wait somewhere nearby. But once Lark and Alastair entered through the darkened doorway, they would be alone in the devil's lair.

But *not* alone.

They would be together. It had been a very long time since Lark had felt she had someone she could trust and rely on implicitly. Perhaps never. She'd trusted Harriet, of course, but she'd always taken care of the other girl, never the other way around. And though she'd certainly relied on the others in her gang, her trust had been limited since they'd have put their own good above hers in an instant. And she'd have done the same in reverse.

What she felt with Alastair at her side was wholly different. It was an equal give-and-take. An equal desire to protect and defend. And she knew without doubt he felt the same.

Though her eyes were closed and her head was bowed against Alastair's chest, she could easily sense when they'd left the darkened alley to enter the building. Knowing the necessity of learning something of their surroundings, she risked a peek from beneath the shadow of her hood as they were led along a dimly lit corridor by a man dressed head to toe in black, who appeared to be more a bruiser than a footman.

The other night, Hale had discovered that many of the guards stationed in and around the place were men he knew from the neighborhood and some he'd even trained. He'd had a little *talk* with them and fixed their loyalties. Tonight, they'd been instructed to follow their usual orders until Hale gave them the signal to do otherwise.

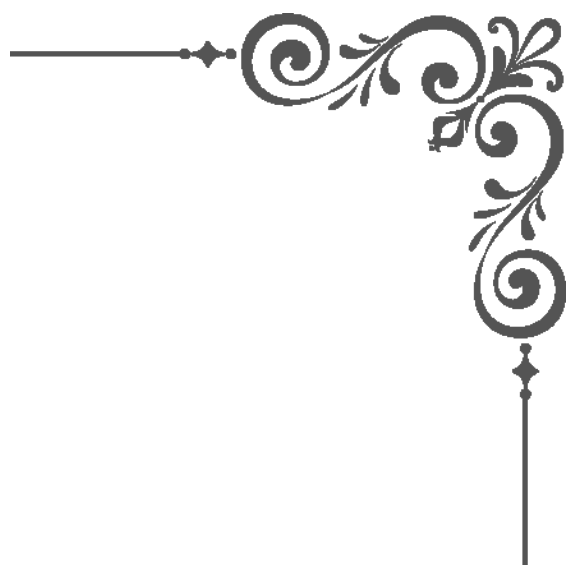
The hallway was as common as hallways go, except for being kept so dark. They passed by a few closed doors, but there seemed to be no activity beyond the doors. In fact, the entire place was shockingly quiet.

Next, they ascended a flight of stairs before heading down yet another long hall. Now she could hear some muffled noise up ahead. A hum of voices and possibly some music and other indiscernible sounds. But before they got close enough to determine any more, they stopped and turned toward a closed door and another large guard. The door opened and both guards stepped aside for Alastair to enter.

Lark couldn't see what was ahead beyond the flickering reflection of more candlelight, but Alastair's grip tightened, and he hugged her closer to his chest. If he was getting fatigued from carrying her so long, he certainly didn't indicate as much. But he seemed to hesitate in the doorway, as though he might be considering turning on his heel and leaving right then.

Lark gave a soft whimper and shifted subtly in his hold. Hoping he'd take it as encouragement to continue with the plan.

"Come forth, my lord. Your arrival has been highly anticipated."



Chapter Twenty- seven

Alastair tightened his hold on Lark, trying to assure her of his protection despite the trepidation running wild through his blood. How could he have thought this was a good idea? Bringing her to this place...tasking her with such a dangerous and uncertain goal. He'd promised to keep her safe. But what if he couldn't?

Lowndes sat behind a large desk painted a gleaming black. He didn't look up after his initial welcome and took a moment to lower his quill and close the book he'd been writing in before setting it in a drawer of the desk. Then he stood and gave a nod toward the cloaked woman in Alastair's arms.

"Let's see what you brought, shall we?"

Alastair moved to the center of the room, which was essentially a small office, and heard the door close behind him.

"Set her on her feet so I can have a look at her," Lowndes instructed.

As Alastair shifted his hold on her, a soft sound of protest slid from her throat and her head lolled to one side. With his throat tight, he forced her to stand. Though she stumbled and swayed and arched in his hands, she remained on her feet. Turning her to face Lowndes, he kept one arm around her middle to hold her in place as he pulled the hood back.

Lowndes's eyes narrowed to an assessing stare. Stepping up to Lark, he lifted her head with a finger under her chin. Alastair clenched his teeth.

"Pretty enough, I suppose," Lowndes mused. "She has a look of youth and angelic innocence about her that some will find appealing. Remove the cloak."

"I made sure she met your requirements," Alastair noted testily.

The other man's glare was hard. "I'll not present anything I deem unfit, which means I must have a full look at the chit before we go any further. Remove the damn cloak."

Though fury burned through his veins, Alastair fought hard to contain his ire. Releasing the ties of the cloak, he unwrapped it from around Lark and tossed it aside.

Lowndes slid his dark gaze over Lark's form from head to toe as a

slow smile widened his mouth. "You've dressed her up for us," he noted, his gaze glinting in the candlelight.

Turner had mentioned something about the gown Portia brought for Lark to wear containing special features that might come in handy, but all he could see was that it barely covered her form. The bodice itself was cut ridiculously low, and the skirt was nothing but thin wisps of material held together by the black velvet sash beneath her breasts.

Since Lark had already been shrouded in the heavy cloak when the ladies had joined them, he hadn't seen her in the gown until now. And he had an instant urge to sweep the cloak back over her.

"An angel gowned as a harlot," Lowndes murmured appreciatively. "An interesting choice."

When the endearment Alastair himself had used for Lark in moments of pleasure and tenderness fell from the other man's lips, Alastair tensed and his hand curled into a fist. As though sensing his struggle, she shifted against him and her head fell back as her eyes fluttered and opened.

"The potion is starting to wear off." Lowndes glanced at his pocket watch then nodded to her bound wrists. "She's well secured?"

"Of course."

Lowndes turned away and crossed to another door on the opposite end of the room. "Follow me."

Alastair scooped Lark into his arms and followed Lowndes into a small sitting room, currently empty but for two large guards standing sentry beside another closed door. Pulling a key from his pocket, Lowndes unlocked the door and gestured for Alastair to follow him inside. "Set her there," he said with an impatient wave of his hand.

Alastair stepped past him into a dimly lit space only slightly larger than a closet. There was no rug on the floor and no windows. Only a long bench set against one wall, where two women sat several feet apart from each other. Both were dressed in the common uniform of housemaids. They wore no gags, but their hands had clearly been bound behind their backs. Their gazes were shiny but aware. And were filled with fear and confusion.

"Quickly, now. The others have already gathered. We'll need to announce that a third item will be available for purchase."

Alastair scanned the room in disdain. "You just leave them here?" he asked harshly. "What if they were to escape? Or cause trouble by wailing and shrieking?"

"No need to worry. No sound can get past these walls. And with Dryden out of town, I'm the only person with a key. The men outside will manage anything untoward." He started back through the door. "Leave the chit and come with me, Warfield. The others are awaiting

us.”

Alastair approached the bench and set Lark carefully between the other two women. She moaned softly and her hands lifted before falling heavily back to her lap. Alastair’s chest tightened. Her acting was impeccable. Even he was believing in her groggy vulnerability.

His heart sank heavily to the pit of his stomach.

He hated leaving her there but she’d asked him to trust her and he did. He also had to believe Hale and the Turners would be able to carry out their parts. It was difficult to place so much trust in near strangers. But he had no choice. Their plan had to work, which meant Alastair had to focus on his own role. As long as everything continued as expected, Lark wouldn’t be locked in this room for long.

Straightening, he caught her gaze and held it for an intense moment. He saw no fear in the dark gray depths. Only a resolve that matched his own. Then he forced himself to ignore the tight twist in his chest, and he turned his back on her and left. The sound of Lowndes’s key turning in the lock sent an icy shiver down his back. But he had to focus on what came next.

No matter how honorable Turner’s magistrate might be, he wouldn’t be able to do a thing without proof that each of the men present tonight was knowledgably and willfully engaged in the illegal trafficking of women who’d been abducted and sold against their will. Alastair needed to keep the gentlemen in sight and distracted so the others could have time to infiltrate the building and secure the necessary evidence.

Lowndes led him back through the small office to the hallway. Rather than going back the way Alastair had arrived, Lowndes took him to the other end of the hall, where two more guards stood sentry outside a pair of double doors.

Before the doors were opened, Lowndes turned to Alastair with a stern expression. “Remember, my lord, these men are assuming a certain anonymity. Even if you know them, you must not indicate such within these walls. However false the game, it creates a shield of security and discretion we *all* rely upon. Tonight’s occurrences are never to be spoken about with anyone else. You understand?”

“You went over all this the other night,” Alastair noted impatiently.

Lowndes narrowed his gaze. “It bears repeating.”

Giving a nod, Alastair conceded. “I understand.”

“Good. Then let’s proceed.” He nodded to the guards who opened both doors to allow them entrance.

The room beyond was a grand drawing room that somewhat resembled the drawing rooms of London’s most exclusive gentlemen’s clubs. Dark, polished mahogany lined the walls. The floor was covered

in thick, plush carpeting in a shade of charcoal gray. Sofas and chairs upholstered in a lighter gray were arranged in various groupings before a grand fireplace carved of the finest Italian marble. The far end of the room contained gaming tables. A door in the corner was slightly cracked to allow the music of a string quartet to filter gently in from the room beyond.

With the exception of Dryden, all the expected players were present. Even Lord Buckley, whom Alastair had only just met at Lowndes's last soirée. In addition, Alastair counted eight more men. A few he recognized, but many he didn't. All of them dressed to impress in their finest evening wear, some even wore symbols of high military rank or their positions within foreign governments.

It was clear Lowndes's commitment to anonymity was simply a façade. Apparently, displays of status were more important than discretion for some of them. It shouldn't surprise him that they simply couldn't conceive of hiding the evidence of their superiority. They no doubt believed their status was exactly what kept them safe from unwanted consequence. Such conceit would ultimately become their downfall.

"Mingle, my lord," Lowndes instructed beneath his breath. "Drink the fine champagne. Indulge in a little gambling. Our role is to set our guests at ease. To engage them in the pleasure of the evening and loosen their purse strings."

"And when does the main event begin?"

"In time." Lowndes glanced at his watch. "No need to rush."

Alastair's tilted smile was genuine as he started toward the gaming tables.

Agreed. There's no need to rush at all.



AFTER ALASTAIR LEFT with Lowndes and the door was locked behind them, Lark sat unmoving for several long moments. Listening.

She listened for any movement of the guards outside the door. But nothing reached her inside the closet.

She listened to the two women in the room with her. One of them whimpered softly and tugged occasionally on the ropes binding her hands behind her back. The other simply breathed short and swift, as though she couldn't keep up with the panic in her mind. Neither of them attempted to speak despite not being gagged. Perhaps they'd been threatened or maybe they'd already expressed their questions and fears with futile results.

Finally, Lark slowly shifted her position on the bench, sitting straighter as she began a slow, intent perusal of the room. There was no door beyond the one they'd come through and no window. The

bench they sat upon appeared to be bolted to the wall, and beyond that, the room was utterly empty.

Lifting her bound wrists, she carefully twisted one hand so she could grasp a hidden loop in the cravat. A sharp tug on the loop loosened the knot enough for her to maneuver her hands free. She gratefully removed her gag next. After licking her lips to ease the minor chapping, she kept her voice to a very low whisper despite Lowndes's assurance that no sound could escape the room.

"I need you both to stay very calm and very quiet," she said simply as she shifted first to the girl who was whimpering. Meeting her frightened gaze, Lark gently urged her to turn away so she could access her bound wrists. "I'm going to free you now, but you must not do or say *anything* until I indicate it's safe to do so. Do you understand?"

The girl nodded quickly as she twisted to lift her hands.

The ropes that bound her were rough and tightly secured. The knots wouldn't budge.

Lark slipped her fingers into the bodice of her borrowed gown. She'd been astonished earlier when Portia had showed her that an abbreviated corset was attached directly to the inside of the bodice. And sewn within the inner lining of the corset, right between her pushed up breasts, was a slim sleeve just large enough to hold her specialized knife. Withdrawing it from where it had been nestled against her sternum, Lark triggered the mechanism that allowed the blade to slide free.

The ropes were quickly dealt with. After giving another gesture to keep silent, to which the girl nodded briskly, Lark turned to the captive on the other side.

Catching sight of the blade in Lark's hand, the girl's eyes widened and she began to squirm.

"Shh," Lark said gently. "I won't hurt you. I'm going to release you. But you must relax and trust me. Breathe slow and deep and remain still."

The young woman responded gradually to Lark's soothing words, and after a few blinks, her gaze appeared slightly less terrified.

"Good," Lark murmured. "I'm just going to cut your binds, but you must stay in place and stay silent. For just a little longer. I need to be sure the way is clear before we leave this room. Do you understand?"

The girl nodded.

After cutting her ropes, Lark approached the door and pressed her ear to the thick wood in an attempt to determine if the guards were still there. All she heard was silence. She'd hoped to be able to hear something of when Hale might be near, but the soundproofing of the room was going to prevent that possibility. Taking slow and steady

breaths, she considered how much time had passed since they'd arrived.

One of the girls shifted behind her and issued a soft sound of distress.

Returning to the bench, Lark asked, "Are either of you hurt? Can you both walk on your own?"

They both nodded.

Lark decided not to wait any longer. She had no doubt Hale had been convincing in his chat with the guards. Hopefully, the men just beyond the door were a couple of his old mates.

"All right," she breathed. "After I open the door, stay back until I say to follow. Are you ready?"

They nodded again and shared a tense look. Rising to their feet, they waited expectantly as Lark turned back to the door. Sliding her fingers beneath her gown's black velvet sash, she withdrew her small pouch of tools from another cleverly hidden pocket.

She sent a silent whisper of gratitude to Portia for her foresight and her amazing gown.

As silently as she could—just in case the guards outside were not included in Hale's new recruits—she manipulated the lock until the inner workings fell into place. After hearing the light snick, she held her breath, waiting for a reaction beyond the door.

There was nothing.

Maybe the guards had already abandoned their post.

Standing, she returned the tools to her sash and reclaimed the welcome weight of the knife to her grip. She gave the other women a look of encouragement then slowly turned the handle of the door. The latch released without a sound and Lark cautiously opened it a crack.

The room beyond was dim but she could see no one about. Though her heart thundered heavily against her ribs, she maintained a steady breath and calm composure as she opened the door wide enough for them to slip through.

And suddenly came face to chest with the burly guard. He blocked all sight of the room behind him as he stared down at her with a forbidding expression.

Damn.

Even as she tightened her grip on her knife and tensed to strike, the man was suddenly thrust to the side as Hale's familiar form took his place. Hale stared the man down with a look as intimidating as any Lark had ever seen.

"Disappear," he growled with a short tip of his head.

Without a word, the guard turned and lumbered away.

Hale looked to Lark and flashed a grin. "All set, dove?"

Lark waved the others forward. "Come along."

Gratefully, they came forward without hesitation, likely eager to take their chances with the unknown rather than wait for whatever fate their captors intended.

Once back in the small office where Lark had been examined by Lowndes, Hale paused. Lark could already hear the faint sounds she'd detected on arrival. The music and a murmured collection of voices that seemed to have gotten louder.

"Beyond this door is the riskiest part. We'll have to be silent and swift as we make our way down the hall. Understand?"

The two maids still looked terrified, but they nodded.

When Hale looked to Lark, she gave a short shake of her head. "I'm staying."

"Like hell you are," he denied in a low growl.

"I need to search this room first," she whispered. "There might not be another chance."

"Turner's already scouring the place. Your job is done."

"And *your* job is to see these women to safety," she urged. "Once I've looked through the desk, I'll be right behind you. Now, go," she said, practically giving him a shove toward the door.

"Bloody hell," he muttered harshly. "Lord save me from willful females." Turning to the maids, who'd been watching their argument with wary concern, he muttered in obvious annoyance, "Come on, then."

Lark added her assurance. "He'll see you to safety."

Hale peeked into the hallway first then turned to give Lark one last scowling glance before he gestured for the maids to follow him through the door. As soon as the door was closed behind them, Lark rushed to the desk.

As quietly and as quickly as possible, she searched the drawers, checking for false bottoms and hidden compartments. When she came across a clothbound ledger in one drawer, a rush of hopeful excitement claimed her until she paged through it and saw that it was nothing more than an account of gambling loans issued by Lowndes to various named guests. At worst, it only proved an illegal gaming club. Certainly nothing the authorities would care much about.

There had to be more.

The building might have been purchased by Dryden, but it had been made quite clear to her earlier that Lowndes was in charge of things. And he took his role very seriously. A man like him would want to keep anything vital to their illegal activities close at hand.

Her recent experience with secret passages had her checking every nook and cranny, every wall panel, anything that seemed slightly out of place. But the office was small, with minimal clutter. She was beginning to feel like her instincts might have been wrong when she

noticed a slightly dulled spot on the polished floor in front of a liquor cabinet. Though one could assume the lord just liked his brandy, Lark noted the fine layer of dust on the decanters and glassware.

Running her fingers over the cabinet, she felt a spot on the underside of a shelf that had been worn smooth. When she crouched down to take a closer look, she discovered a tiny oval-shaped hole.

A hidden lock mechanism?

Sorting through her tools, she found one that would fit, and after only a little effort, she heard a satisfying snick. At the same time, the entire cabinet released from the wall on silent hinges. Her heart racing, Lark swung the cabinet open to find a hidden staircase. Interesting but not what she was looking for. Fighting frustration, she turned to examine the backside of the cabinet itself. Noting a notch along one side of the back panel, she realized it opened to reveal a small hidden cupboard. Inside were several stacks of pound notes and an exact replica of the loan ledger from the desk. Except this book contained an entirely different sort of accounting.

Lark discovered detailed transactions going back several years listing names, dates, payments, and even the physical descriptions of women who'd been sold and to whom and the households from which they'd been procured.

Her heart pounded. It was everything they needed!

The ledger exposed each of the gentlemen involved in the operation and every one of the *guests* who'd participated in their unlawful and immoral business venture. She had to get it to the authorities waiting outside. It was more than enough to justify a raid and the necessary arrests.

She was just about to close the cabinet with the intention of fleeing swiftly after Hale and the two maids when she heard a footfall in the hall beyond the door. Reacting without thought, she stepped inside the concealed stairway and swung the cabinet back in place—making sure not to latch it in case she couldn't get it opened again—just as the office door opened. Holding her breath, afraid to move in case someone heard her, she listened as a long stride crossed the room. Whoever it was headed straight toward the connecting sitting room and the closet where she and the other maids had been secured.

By now, he'd have seen that the door was unguarded. Another moment, and he'd know the women had escaped.

The cursed shout echoed from the other room. Then more swift footfalls through the office and a harshly muttered "Damn Warfield" before the steps retreated down the hall.

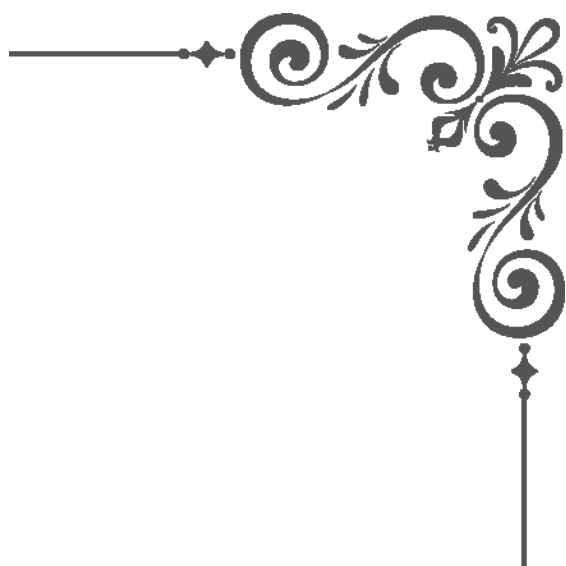
Lark immediately pushed the cabinet open but then hesitated as fear held her still in indecision. She'd recognized Lowndes's voice, and the way he'd muttered Warfield's name terrified her. But no matter

how badly she wanted to, she couldn't stick around to ensure the marquess would be all right. She had to get the evidence she'd discovered into the proper hands.

The office door had been left open and Lowndes could return at any moment. She obviously wouldn't be able to leave that way, which meant she'd have to risk the hidden staircase and hope it led to another exit from the building.

But before she fled, something compelled her to make one quick swap. It was a small thing, but it might be enough to throw Lowndes off. At the very least, it might buy the marquess some time until the raid started.

Finishing quickly, she stepped into the hidden stairway once again and closed the cabinet behind her with a decided click. The only way now was forward.



Chapter Twenty-eight

Alastair slid a quick glance across the room as Chesterfield made his way over to where Lowndes stood smoking and chatting with two of his guests. Drawing Lowndes away, Chesterfield spoke to him in a hushed tone before Lowndes checked his pocket watch and gave a nod. Tensing, Alastair watched as the younger man left the room.

Barely an hour had passed since Alastair had left Lark locked in the windowless room.

Had she had gotten out safely?

Despite the urge inside him to rush out and confirm her escape for himself, all he could do was remain calmly engaged in the game of cards he was playing. If Lowndes was even now discovering the women were missing, the focus of inquiry could swiftly fall upon Alastair.

Several minutes later, he saw Lowndes return to the room. Doing his best to keep the man in his peripheral vision, he played his next card, sipped from his champagne, and laughed at something one of the other players said.

The expression on Lowndes's face gave little away, but there was an undeniable tension in his movements that hadn't been there before. After Lowndes whispered intently to Chesterfield, the duke turned away to approach the Lords Marlowe and Altham as they sat before the fire with cigars and brandy. Lowndes, however, veered toward the table where Alastair was currently winning the round.

"Pardon me, gentlemen," the lord said with a smooth smile as his hard gaze settled intently on Alastair. "I'm afraid I must borrow my friend here for a few moments."

Alastair lifted a brow in question, but he graciously rose to his feet. "My apologies," he noted to the other players, "but I expect to be back soon enough to continue fleecing you all."

"Don't worry, my boy," Chesterfield said as came up behind him. Placing a heavy hand on Alastair's shoulder, he offered a tight smile. "There's no need to rush back. I'll take your place here."

Though the older man's tone was amicable, there was no denying the hard glint in his gaze.

Displaying nothing but casual curiosity, Alastair followed Lowndes

from the room. Once in the hall, he asked with a hint of impatience, "What's this about? Isn't it time to get things started? You promised I'd be leaving here with a small fortune. So far, all I've gotten is some damned pocket money."

"Come with me, my lord," Lowndes replied curtly, ignoring his questions as he ushered Alastair into the office once again. "Have a seat."

Alastair took the indicated chair as Lowndes stepped around the desk and turned to face him.

"Why are you here, Warfield?"

Alastair gave the man a questioning look. "You know exactly why I'm here. Though I'm starting to wonder if you've any intention of going forward with things. What the hell is the delay, Lowndes?"

The other man narrowed his gaze to dark slits. "The women are gone."

Relief rushed through him, but he rose swiftly to his feet in a show of shock and anger. "What do you mean they're gone?" he half shouted.

Before Lowndes could answer, Hazelton came charging into the study, followed closely by Marlowe and Altham. "What's this about the chits getting free? They've never gotten free before. Why weren't they properly secured?"

"They were," Lowndes replied without taking his eyes off Alastair. "And now they're not."

"What about the bloody guards?"

"The guards are gone as well."

"The hell you say," Marlowe exclaimed gruffly.

"I'm as shocked as you are," Lowndes noted smoothly. "I was thinking Warfield might be able to explain the situation to us."

As all eyes fell to Alastair, he returned their stares with a cold glare of his own. "How the blasted hell would I know anything about your men? And the last I saw of my housemaid, she was still tied and gagged in a locked room." He eyed Lowndes with heavy suspicion. "Didn't you say you're the only one here with a key? How do we know *you* didn't set them free? Or perhaps you decided you'd rather have the full profit they could bring in rather than sharing with the rest of us?"

Marlowe muttered something incoherent beneath his breath.

"He doesn't even try to deny it," Alastair noted with a growl. He allowed every bit of the fury and disgust he felt for these men to show in his face as he started for Lowndes. The longer he kept their focus on him, the more time Turner had to complete his search of the premises. He lowered his chin to say in a menacing tone, "I won't be played for a fool, Lowndes."

He lunged for the other man but was quickly grabbed from behind. Twisting his head, he saw that Altham and Hazelton had both taken hold of him to keep him from going after Lowndes.

"Calm yourself, Warfield," Altham commanded harshly as he twisted Alastair's arm behind him. "Lowndes has never betrayed us before and there'd be no reason for him to do so now."

Though Alastair could've dropped both of them in a few quick moves, he refrained. Instead, he put up enough of a fight to require the full attention of every man in the room, without revealing his full abilities.

"Bloody hell," Hazelton grunted as they managed to shove Alastair back down into the chair.

Continuing to fight and struggle as he glared daggers at Lowndes and shouted accusations at all four of them, he was eventually secured to the chair with some rope Lowndes fetched from the room where the women had been kept. The older men were breathing heavily from the physical exertion of containing Alastair, and though he hadn't lifted a finger in the tussle, Marlowe swiped a handkerchief across his sweating brow.

As they caught their breath, a fiercely scowling Chesterfield entered the room. Shutting the door behind him, he admonished from between clenched teeth, "Keep it down in here. Buckley is desperately trying to keep our guests' attention on revelry, but many of them are starting to wonder what's going on."

Lowndes glared at Alastair. "If we discover you're behind this, Warfield, your life won't be worth the boots you're wearing."

"Go to hell," he retorted.

Lowndes ignored him to direct his gaze to Chesterfield. "Your Grace, why don't you and Marlowe return to the drawing room. Say whatever you must to keep everyone calm and happy. We don't want them suspecting a problem and running off just yet. Altham and Hazelton, search this building from top to bottom. The women may yet be found. You," he said sharply, looking back to Alastair as the others left the room, "will stay right here with me until we have a better understanding of just what the hell is going on."

"Wonderful." Alastair sneered as the others left the room to do as they'd been instructed. "And just what shall we do if the women aren't found? They could even now be running through the streets shouting for the authorities."

"And what if they do?" Lowndes asked snidely. "We're lords of the ton. Who'd believe hysterical maids over us?"

"You're disturbingly confident considering the night is basically in shambles," Alastair observed.

"Do you expect me to panic like those fools?" He scoffed. "You

must realize by now that this whole operation was my idea. Those overindulged lords only ever thought of their own pleasures. They had no desire for anything more. No vision of greater things. None of them ever cared to invest their time or energy into making this a successful venture. They simply want to reap the rewards. Dryden may own this building but it *belongs* to me.” He gave an almost mournful shake of his head. “Shelbourne was the only one who understood. But he got careless and left himself with no way out. I assure you, I’m never careless and I always have a way out.”

The smug look on the other lord’s face was nearly enough to turn Alastair’s stomach. With unbelievable difficulty, he resisted the urge to curl his hands into fists. “You’d betray them without a second thought, wouldn’t you?”

Lowndes shrugged. “I prefer to think of it as self-preservation. Besides, if you truly had nothing to do with the chits getting loose, then one of *them* has already betrayed *me*. That simply won’t be borne.”

Alastair forced himself to eye the lord with a hint of admiration. “You’re far more devious than I gave you credit for, Lowndes.”

The other lord smiled. “Yet here you are, learning all my secrets anyway. I knew you were a clever sort, Warfield. I almost hope this fiasco isn’t your fault. Because if it is”—he paused to slip a hand inside his coat and withdraw a small pistol, which he set within easy reach on his desk—“I’m afraid this will be the end of our friendship.”

Alastair took a deep breath, subtly testing the ropes that secured his hands to the chair. They’d likely hold. The chair itself was made of sturdy oak and wouldn’t break easily. Perhaps he should’ve fought harder to keep from being restrained.

All of a sudden, the sound of a sharp whistle cut through the building, followed by the distant echo of footsteps and multiple-voiced shouts.

Lowndes stiffened and a slight look of panic crossed his features as he rushed toward the door. After a very brief glance in the hall, he closed it again. Glaring daggers at Alastair, he asked, “What in hell have you done?”

Knowing exactly what the whistle indicated, Alastair strained against the ropes binding him to the chair as he met the other lord’s gaze with a scowling look of confusion. “What are you talking about? And what the devil was that sound?”

Lowndes stared back at him with a curious expression. Then he sighed. “It seems our friendship was destined for a tragic end. So be it.”

Lowndes turned to the narrow liquor cabinet behind the desk. After a moment, the cabinet swung open like a door. Reaching inside,

Lowndes withdrew a small book not unlike the one he'd slipped into his desk drawer on Alastair's arrival.

Without hesitation, he tossed the book into a bin beside the desk. Then, with a flourish, he picked up a small gas lamp from the desktop and tossed it in as well. The sound of shattering glass was accompanied by a sudden burst of flames leaping from the bin.

Alastair's stomach turned as he realized Lowndes had likely destroyed a vital piece of evidence. Yet Turner had to have found something else to trigger the raid. If they didn't have enough to hold everyone involved accountable, he had to hope at least Lowndes and the others in the brotherhood would face the consequences of their actions.

"I told you I always have a way out, Warfield," Lowndes noted with a smile. "Unfortunately, I've one more loose end to tie up."

He stepped up to the desk and reached for the pistol he'd left there when he'd darted toward the liquor cabinet.

Alastair had never developed an aversion to the idea of his own death and had accepted the inevitability of it long ago. But in that moment, as he noted the murderous intent in the other man's eyes, his entire being was filled with a fierce and sudden desire to stay alive. For one reason only.

Lark.

He wanted more time with her. He wanted to hear her laugh. He wanted to somehow be a part of inspiring true happiness in her life. And love. He wanted the opportunity to *love* her.

With a harsh sound, he strained against the ropes securing him to the chair and was rewarded with a slight give, but not enough. "I had nothing to do with this," he stated firmly, hoping to delay the other man long enough to free himself.

Lowndes shook his head as he palmed the weapon. "I'm afraid that no longer matters. You've become a liability, my lord."

Alastair glared back at him but didn't stop fighting to be free. He ground his back teeth as his wrists grew raw from the ropes, and his throat closed with the darkest, heaviest regret he'd ever known.

Lowndes simply smiled as he lifted the pistol and took aim.

Without warning, the false liquor cabinet suddenly swung outward, slamming against Lowndes. He stumbled to the side with a harsh curse, knocking over the garbage bin and casting its smoldering contents across the carpeted floor.

With decisive grace and speed, Lark emerged from the shadows behind the cabinet to pick up a crystal decanter that had fallen and lifted it over her head. Before Lowndes could regain his balance and turn to face her, she smashed the decanter against the back of his skull. The pistol fell harmlessly from his grip as he crumpled to the

floor.

In the next breath, Lark rushed to kneel at Alastair's side.

Shocked. Relieved. Terrified. Alastair growled furiously, "What in blasted hell are you doing?"

"You didn't come out after the raid started," she replied without looking up as she sawed at the ropes binding him with a small blade he recognized from when she'd bandaged his wound. "I suspected they'd restrained you somehow."

"That's no reason to put yourself back in harm's way," he shouted in frustration.

The ropes holding one arm to the chair fell away, and she shifted to the bindings on the other side as she calmly met his hard stare. "It's every reason," she said firmly. "You'd have come for me."

Fear and a painful disbelief twisted through him. He brought his free hand to the side of her face. The urge to kiss her—to haul her into his lap so he could express the unspeakable rise of emotion inside him—was overwhelming. This wasn't the time or place to say what he needed to say. And then he couldn't say anything as a sudden movement behind her stopped his breath.

Alastair pushed Lark to the floor and leapt to his feet in one motion, putting his body between her and Lowndes as he grasped ahold of his chair and swung around to send it crashing into Lowndes.

Lark had cut through enough of the ropes that the impact freed him from his remaining bindings. As Lowndes staggered back, Alastair tossed the chair aside to face the other man unencumbered, flexing his fingers to restore proper feeling. His eyes burned from the smoke filling the room, and he could see small licks of flame igniting from the scattered remains of the burned book, but he kept his focus on the man whose dark glare promised murder.

Anticipation sparked through him as he prepared for a fight.

"You're going to regret that," Lowndes snarled. But before he could initiate an attack, a flash of red caught his attention as Lark flew past them.

Both men realized her intention at the same time, but Lowndes was closer.

Alastair's heart raced as Lark and Lowndes both dove for the gun lying beneath the desk. He lost sight of the pistol a moment before Lowndes let out a harsh grunt followed by a roar of frustration as Lark suddenly rolled to the side. She had the gun, but before she could get out of reach, Lowndes grasped a fistful of her skirts.

As Alastair lunged for Lowndes, the wispy red silk simply tore away from Lark's gown, revealing a pair of black fitted breeches as she scrambled to the other side of the desk, gun in hand.

Hauling the other man to his feet, Alastair hooked his forearm

beneath the lord's chin, angling his head back to allow a quick strike with the side of Alastair's hand to his throat. The sudden trauma caused Lowndes to drop to the floor without a sound.

Heaving a breath, Alastair looked up to see Lark already lowering the pistol. Their gazes caught and held.

It was over.

He expected to feel some sort of triumph. Or relief. But all he felt was a soul-deep weariness.

She took a step toward him. Her expression was slightly shadowed by concern. "Alastair?"

With a rough sound, he opened his arms and she rushed into them. He held her tight for a moment. Just breathing her in. Reveling in the beat of her heart against his chest. When he finally loosened his grip enough to take her face in his hands, the shocking sight of blood smeared across her neck and bared shoulder stopped his breath.

"You're hurt." His words were tight and hoarse with fear as he grasped her shoulders in a hard grip, his gaze intently searching for the source of the blood. It took a moment to realize she was shaking her head.

"I'm fine."

"No, you're not," he argued fiercely, still trying to find the wound.

"The blood is yours."

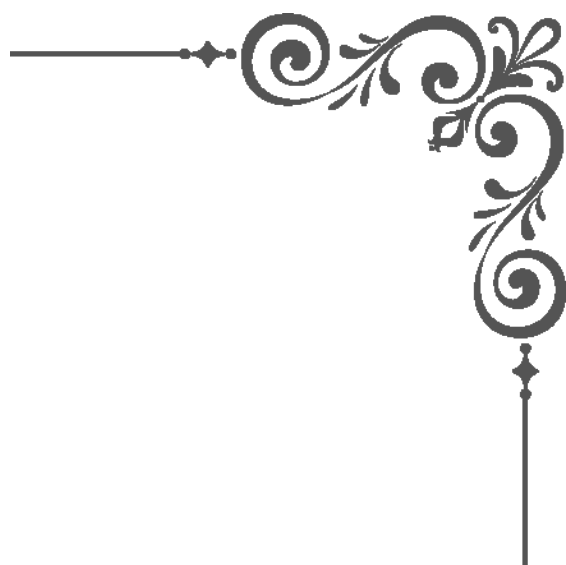
As soon as she uttered the words, he noticed the garish red stain soaking his sleeve. Her knife must have gotten him when he'd shoved her to the floor to protect her from Lowndes. The sight and smell of the blood suddenly caused his stomach to give a sickening twist, and he clenched his teeth against the rush of lights behind his eyes.

Somewhere in the queasy swirl of his mind, he noted how odd it was that the reaction hadn't been triggered when he'd thought it was her blood.

Then he felt her hands framing his face and he forced himself to meet her gaze. Deep and strong and steady. "Alastair, we have to leave."

Alarm flashed through him at the tone of her voice, and he glanced about to see that the flames from the bin had gained momentum and had spread across the carpet to the drapes covering the window. The room would be fully ablaze in moments.

His debilitating dizziness was immediately swept away by the greater concern. Lifting Lowndes from the floor, he tossed the unconscious man over his shoulder then rushed after Lark as she led them from building.



Chapter Twenty-nine

After turning Lowndes over to the magistrate's men, they learned that all of the *gentlemen* present had been taken in for questioning. The magistrate had also given instructions for the marquess to be escorted directly to his office in order to provide his statement on the whole ordeal.

Before Lark even knew what was happening or had a chance to voice her preference to remain with him, Alastair arranged for her to be taken back to Warfield House by the Turners.

Noting her reluctance to leave, Dell explained that such things could sometimes take several hours to conclude, and with so many people involved, the marquess wasn't likely to be finished any time soon. He suggested she'd be better off returning home to gain some rest in case something was needed of her later. Though she would have preferred to stay with the marquess, once she'd given her own statement on the events of the evening, there was no further reason for her to remain.

Portia Turner was thrilled to hear of the effectiveness of her specially designed gown, and she insisted Lark keep the fitted breeches, noting they were quite handy for a variety of activities. Lark accepted though she struggled to imagine how she might use them as a housekeeper.

Dawn was not far away by the time she slipped quietly through the servants' entrance of Warfield House. She made it safely to her rooms without encountering anyone. It was only a few hours before she'd have to start her day, and though she had no true expectations of getting any sleep, she dressed in her nightclothes after washing away the residue of the night's ordeal. Then she curled up in one of her armchairs before the fire and listened for the marquess's return.

She considered waiting in his bedchamber but decided against it.

The goal he'd been working so intently toward had finally been accomplished. And though he no doubt felt significant satisfaction in seeing the brotherhood finally brought to justice, there had been a shadow of discontent in his eyes that had worried her.

More than anything, she hoped he'd finally claim the right to his own happiness.

And she wanted desperately to be a part of it. To show him that he deserved more than what his painful past had given him. That there

was no need for any more doubt or fear or resistance between them. That she'd never regret the time they had together, and if he'd have her, she'd remain with him and love him in all the ways she knew how.

She'd *love* him.

She *did* love him.

The realization was raw and new and utterly overwhelming. Besides Harriet, she'd never loved anyone. For a time, she'd wondered if she were even truly capable of the emotion. But she knew with undeniable certainty that the feeling squeezing so tightly in her chest as she thought of Alastair was love. Love and the unrelenting desire for him to believe—deep down and truly—how worthy he was of the sentiment. How utterly deserving he was of the admiration and trust and tenderness she felt for him.

Just as suddenly as the revelation of her true feelings had filled her with joy and purpose, in the next breath, the crushing weight of reality took it all away.

Though she wanted nothing more than to express every bit of what she feeling, she knew with a sudden, stark, and painful certainty that nothing could come of it.

He was a titled lord while she was his housekeeper and a former thief. A love affair of any kind between them would be troubled and short. He'd resisted his attraction and pushed her away so many times already. And though he'd implied he wanted more of her after the wonderous night they'd shared in his bedroom, their time together was destined to end painfully. Her position in his household would constantly remind him of his father's sins and make him doubt his own honor.

She couldn't allow that.

And someday he'd need to marry and have children.

The pressure squeezing her heart intensified a hundredfold at the thought. She couldn't fathom being around for that. Just the pain of imagining him with some lovely lady at his side was nearly too much to bear. She couldn't put herself through that.

With a heavy, hollow feeling in her center, she acknowledged that she had only one choice to make. When she'd gone to him in his room, he'd begged her not to torment him. Her need for him had been too great to heed him then. But she could do it now. She had to.

Rising from the chair, she swallowed down her heart-aching grief. She was doing what needed to be done. Just as she always did. For his sake. And undeniably for hers. The longer she stayed with him and allowed herself to feel all that he inspired, the harder and more painful it would be when it finally ended.

It was better this way.

She repeated the thought over and over in her mind as she swiftly changed clothes and gathered her meager belongings. It didn't take her very long, and the sun was just starting to lighten the sky as she left a note for Gideon then slipped from the house unseen.



AFTER SEVERAL HOURS at the magistrate's office, Alastair returned home with only one desire in mind. He'd almost reached the hallway to Lark's room when Gideon stopped him with a harshly cleared throat.

"A moment, my lord."

Not even trying to disguise his frustration, Alastair turned to his butler. "What is it?"

"I apologize for bothering you with bad news the moment you return from your...ah, evening," the elderly servant noted with a curious glance at Alastair's undeniably rough appearance.

"Out with it, Gideon," Alastair prompted as the butler took a rather pointed interest in the bloodstain Alastair had intently avoided acknowledging for the last hours.

"Yes, ah, it seems Mrs. Evans left us early this morning."

Alastair stiffened sharply as a chilling sensation claimed him from head to toe.

"She left," he repeated, the words forming with difficulty from his tightly clenched jaw.

"Yes," the butler said again as a look of concern crossed his weathered face. "Her note referenced a family emergency of some sort. She offered sincere regrets but indicated she would not be returning."

"Like hell," Alastair muttered beneath his breath. Though fierce and terrifying emotions were coursing through his blood and he was tempted to run back through the door and search for the woman himself, he instead turned to take the stairs two at a time, tersely giving orders to Gideon as he went. "Have a bath sent up immediately and a horse saddled."

"Yes, my lord," Gideon acknowledged. "Shall I post the open housekeeper position?" he called after.

"I don't give a damn."

Fifteen minutes later, Alastair was banging on the door at the address Turner had given him the night of Lowndes's party. The door was opened by a small-statured man in his later years who glared back at him with a pinched expression of annoyance.

"I'm looking for Mr. Turner."

"Ain't no one here by that name," the man retorted as he started closing the door.

Alastair planted a heavy hand against the wood, stopping the man short. "He gave me this address himself. I saw him just a few hours ago and must speak with him immediately."

The other man's hawkish expression twisted into one of mild curiosity. "Are you Warfield, then?"

"I am."

"Turner's not here," the man said as he tried again to shove the door closed.

Seriously losing his patience, Alastair refused to budge. "Where can I find him?"

"You can't." Alastair was sorely tempted to take the rude butler by the throat for his stubborn refusal to be more forthcoming, but then the smaller man tipped his head to offer reluctantly, "But I can get a message to him."

Swearing under his breath but realizing he had no other choice, Alastair glared at the man as he spoke. "I need him to find someone."

"And if she doesn't wish to be found?"

Alastair looked over the man's head to see Portia Turner standing in the hall. Her question hovered in the air before the small man muttered a curse under his breath about interfering females. Then he turned and left Alastair standing in the doorway.

"Do you know where she is?"

Portia shrugged. "If I were you, I'd be more concerned with why she left."

Biting back a harsh retort, Alastair replied, "Trust me, I intend to ask her that exact question, once your husband is able to locate her."

The other woman smiled and gave an elegant wave of her hand. "Well, I'm afraid my husband is occupied with some business across town."

"I'll wait."

Though the lady's eyes widened briefly, she didn't seem particularly put out by his insistence. "The parlor is that way, but I cannot promise how long it will be."

Alastair gave a nod then turned to await Turner's return.

He'd never been a very patient man, but the two hours he spent pacing the floor and staring out the window of that damn room felt like a blasted lifetime. Every minute that passed allowed for Lark to get that much farther away. But he had no other choice. He'd have gone searching for her himself, but he had absolutely no idea where to begin.

He should have asked her more about her past. He should have learned everything he could about her. He still wanted to. Just as he wanted to share with her the memorable experiences from his travels. He even imagined taking her to some of the places he'd visited. But

he'd believed they'd have plenty of time for such things.

For just a flashing moment, he considered Portia's suggestion that Lark didn't want to be found.

If that proved to be true, he'd have to accept it, no matter how it hurt to do so. But Alastair needed to hear from her own lips that she wanted nothing to do with him. He needed to see the truth of it in her eyes. Until then, he simply wasn't willing to give up on the only good and true thing he'd ever known in his life.

Finally, he heard some noise in the hall, and he rushed to the door, intending to intercept Turner before he managed to remove his coat. But it was Mrs. rather than Mr. Turner who was crossing the hall. And it appeared she was leaving.

"Has Turner returned home?"

Portia paused to give a quick smile. "Oh, I haven't the slightest idea, but that is where I'm going, so I expect to find out once I'm there."

Alastair frowned in confusion. "Are you saying this isn't your home?"

"Indeed," she replied as the ornery butler opened the front door. She gave the man a bright smile. "Thank you, Morley. Do ensure Lord Warfield remains on his best behavior for our guest."

"Aye," the man replied, casting a swift glare toward Alastair.

But he was too distracted by Portia's comment to worry about the butler's animosity. "Your guest?"

Was she saying Lark had been in the blasted house the whole time?

"Morley will show you the way, my lord," the lady replied before gifting him with a fierce glare of her own. "But I expect you to understand the lady is welcome to stay here as long as *she* wishes."

Portia waited for his terse nod of agreement—all he could manage with his heart currently blocking his throat—before she turned and walked out the door.

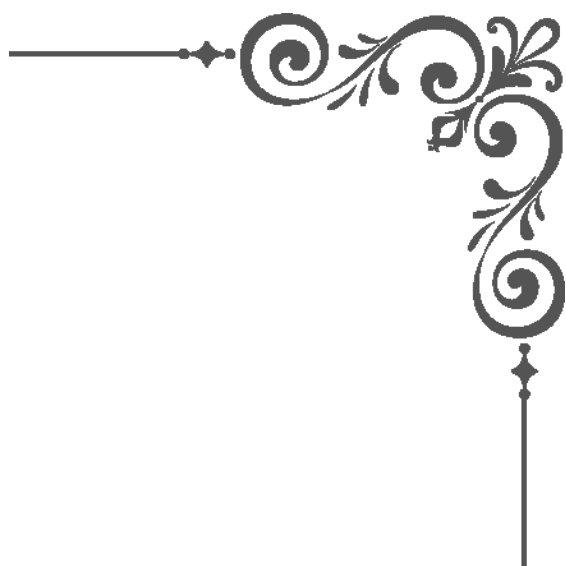
"This way," the man named Morley muttered. Then he led Alastair up the stairs and down a hall to a small sitting room.

Lark was there waiting.

Dressed in the dark navy-blue dress she'd worn the first day she'd arrived at Warfield House, with her hair twisted into a neat bun at her nape, she stood with her back to the fire and her fingers clasped securely at her waist. Her gaze was steady, direct, and utterly unreadable—again, just as she'd appeared at their very first meeting. So resolute and determined.

He was reminded of how she'd shown every bit of expected proper deference until she chose to challenge him by suggesting he needed her.

And how blasted right she'd been.



Chapter Thirty

Lark soaked up the sight of him, letting his presence fill her heart and soul. He closed the door behind him but did not come farther into the room. And he did not speak. Despite every whispered warning in the back of her mind—every silent urging to hold firm to her decision—she couldn't stop herself from reacting to the intense heat and possession of his stare. Everything about him told her how badly he wanted her. Needed her. And her body responded with ready acceptance. Melting with desire for him.

Desire and love and the kind of longing that felt like an undeniable magnetic force.

She twisted her fingers more tightly together and locked her knees. This was for the best. No matter how badly she wanted him now, the pain of having to leave him after her love had grown to something greater than herself would be impossible to bear.

She'd left Warfield House with very little thought as to where she'd go. But then she recalled Portia telling her where to find her if she was ever in need. When she'd arrived, Lark had discovered that, although the house was owned by the Turners, it was not their personal residence.

Morley had allowed her to wait while a message was sent, and Portia arrived very shortly after. She'd assured Lark she could stay at the house as long as she needed. It was clear the other woman had wanted to ask about Lark's reasons for leaving the marquess's household, but she'd noticeably bitten her lip to keep from prying.

Lark had been grateful. Her emotions had been far too raw for any explanation to make sense, and when Portia encouraged her to get some rest, she'd crawled beneath the covers in the bedroom she'd been given and slept for several hours only to be notified upon waking that the marquess had been waiting downstairs for some time.

Now, she struggled to meet his intent gaze. Hoping he wouldn't be able to read all that she was feeling. A mad rush of emotions that twisted together like ribbons in the wind. Fear, need, grief, doubt, and hope.

It felt as though they stood staring at each other in silence for an eternity, though it was likely only a few moments, when he took a step forward. Then another.

Lark held her breath, wondering why he'd come—what he'd say.

His gaze was intense, but his expression was equally distressing. It was not the icy disinterest she'd come to recognize and understand as a method of defense. Instead, there was an undeniable heat in his eyes, and anger pulled heavily at his features as he stalked her position. Though she was reminded of how she'd likened him to a predator the first time she'd met him, she realized that had been nothing compared to the ferocity he displayed now.

The thought of backing away or retreating from his approach didn't even occur to her, and within moments, he'd reached her. One hand slipped around the back of her neck while his other arm encircled her waist to bring her harshly into his arms.

Silver flames flashed in his eyes with a promise that probably should have scared her.

"I thought I told you never to sneak away from me again."

The raw emotion in his voice went straight to her heart, making it thump madly against her ribs. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. Then she didn't have to as he took her mouth with another rough sound.

The kiss was ravenous, harsh, and slightly punishing at first. But when Lark slipped her arms around his back, he groaned and eased the pressure of his lips. The kiss then became something altogether different. A passionate seduction. An erotic vow of lust and worship. A consuming force of love and yearning.

And Lark surrendered to it.

All of it. Her longing and her fear. The knowledge that if she were to eventually leave him with her heart shattered, at least she'd have memories of this consuming love to cherish in her loneliness.

The thought roused a soft sob from her throat and she clung to him more fiercely. But he heard the sound and pulled back, his expression fierce with question and concern. As he looked into her eyes, his features darkened even more. Then he brushed his thumb over her cheek as she felt the trail of moisture left behind.

"Once again I've made you cry," he murmured gravely.

Lark began to shake her head, but he gently took her face in his hands, forcing her to meet his penetrating gaze.

"I can't stand the thought of hurting you. Tell me what I've done." His voice lowered. "Tell me why you left me."

Lark closed her eyes. The truth was hard to admit. Not because loving him made her feel weak or shamed. But because she feared he'd feel obligated toward her once he knew. He'd insist on doing right by her and taking care of her, and she just couldn't fathom being kept in a small house somewhere that he visited on occasion while he went on to have a proper family. And she couldn't begrudge him a family. After all he'd gone through, he deserved every possible

happiness. She'd never get in the way of that, but she couldn't stand by and watch it happen either.

She could, however, be selfish enough to claim just one more chance to experience what it was to be loved by him.

Taking one of his hands, she turned to lead him through the connecting door to the bedroom. The bedclothes were still turned down and a fire still burned in the grate. He followed her without a word, but when she stopped and started to turn around, he slid his arm around her and pulled her back against him. His lips fell to the side of her throat, drifting lightly over her skin. Teasing and tempting until she sighed from the pleasure of it. With his mouth playing at her ear, he reached around to gently cup her breast. Lark's head fell back against his shoulder and she turned her head to lift her mouth to his. The hand covering her breast slid up to encircle her throat and he held her like that. His fingers and thumb braced beneath her jaw as his tongue delved wickedly into her mouth. Claiming her raw moan and breathing life into her.

The kiss was everything and yet still not enough.

She wanted to feel the heat of his skin against hers, the beat of his heart against her breasts, and the throbbing length of his desire between her thighs. As she tried to turn in his arms, his grip tightened for just a moment before he loosened his hold.

Stepping away from him as she turned around, Lark quickly released the small row of buttons on her gown. As soon as she could, she shrugged free of the garment and shoved it past her hips to the floor. When she straightened, she saw that he'd shed his coat and was making quick work of his waistcoat. Their gazes were intent upon each other as they quickly undressed. Within only a few breathless moments, he was naked while she still wore her light chemise and corset.

Her fingers stilled in the act of loosening her corset strings as the light of the fire moved in a mesmerizing pattern over the hard ridges and enticing lines of his body. She swept her lustful gaze over every inch of him, hoping to memorize the masculine beauty of his form. The shadows and lines and power of his physique. Until she finally allowed her attention to settle on that part of him which most visibly proved his desire for her. Proud, strong, and undeniably carnal.

As she stared, he seemed to throb and grow before her eyes. Her lips parted and heat flooded her sex, making her swell and ache. She glanced to his face and her breath caught. Not even the shadow of his tense brow could hide the fire in his gaze. His need looked almost painful.

And Lark's only thought was to soothe him.

Stepping forward, she brought her hands to the broad, curved

muscles of his shoulders before sliding them down his arms. As her fingertips reached the hastily wrapped bandage around his forearm, regret at not having been there to tend him made her throat tight. Biting her lip, she brought her hands to the hard planes of his chest, where she paused to feel his heartbeat beneath her palm before trailing her fingertips over the healing scar along his side. Then finally, the ridged muscles of his belly.

He tensed under her exploration. His hands fisted at his sides, his chin lowered, and his eyes narrowed fiercely. But she wasn't quite finished yet.

As she lowered herself to her knees, she thought she heard a harsh curse slide from his lips, but her attention was captivated by the way his thigh muscles hardened and bunched beneath her hands and how the crisp hair on his legs felt against her palms as she slid her hands around to grasp the taut curves of his buttocks.

While he stood as still and hard as a marble statue, she leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to his belly, next to his hip bone. Breathing in the scent of his skin and his desire, she trailed her lips in a gentle caress toward his navel until her cheek rested against his erection.

His swift inhale and the sudden tightening of his abdomen encouraged her. Lifting her head, she paused for a moment to admire the hard, thick length of him before extending her tongue to glide lightly over his tip in a tentative caress.

The heavy groan that rumbled through his chest reverberated in her own body, making her tremble. And she suddenly had to taste more of him. With a wild fluttering in her belly, she slid the flat of her tongue along his length from base to crown. A heavy groan rumbled in his chest as he shoved his hand through her hair to grasp the back of her head.

She melted.

With a half whimper, half moan, she took him into the heat of her mouth. Twirling her tongue and sucking gently as his breath grew ragged and his body began to tremble. Knowing how he struggled to maintain control despite his mounting pleasure only encouraged her to push him further. She wanted his surrender as he'd demanded hers over and over that night in his bedchamber.

But as her own desire raged through her, she doubted how much more she could take. Her body ached for his. The hollowness inside her was demanding to be filled. To ease some of her own torment, she reached between her thighs to stroke her aching core. The heat and wetness and sensitivity of her flesh astonished her, and she moaned around his pulsing crown.

In an instant, he had her laid out on the rug and was crouching

between her spread thighs. The ravenous possession in his gaze stopped her breath, and then his mouth was covering her, lavishing her, feasting upon her with abandon.

Her body shook from the explosive pleasure of it. Her release claiming her before she could take a full breath. And while the delicate and powerful shockwaves expanded to every corner of her being, he crawled up her body and took her face in his hands as he slid his erection—thick and deep—insider her. It was a fierce mating. A desperate possession. His thrusts were powerful and demanding, lifting her hips and stealing her breath as his mouth devoured hers and her fingernails scored his back. When his breath grew shorter and his thrusts quicker, he lifted his mouth from hers so he could look into her eyes.

Lark stared into that starkly beautiful gaze and gasped for breath. Her heart welled and her body trembled with another rising wave of pleasure. Just as her core began to flutter and her thighs squeezed tight around his hips, he murmured a truth she'd known from the start.

“You’re mine,” he breathed.

The climax erupted through her body, dancing like fire along every nerve. She was stunned by the explosive pleasure and watched in fascinated wonder as he arched his back to release a raw animalistic roar. His body pulsed deep and thick inside her as his hips continued with short, shallow thrusts.

As the last shudders faded away, he carefully lowered himself to her side. She couldn't stop the small sound of protest from escaping her throat as he withdrew from her body, but he immediately pulled her into the circle of his arms. They lay there in silence with her back curved against his chest while their sweat cooled and their breath slowed.

Words danced around behind her lips, but she couldn't say them. How could she say she loved him and then try to convince him to let her go? It was better to say nothing at all, despite how the weight of her emotions made it feel as though her heart were drowning.

After a time, he broke the quiet surrounding them. “If you wish to leave, I won't force you to stay.”

Though his words made her heart seize, it was the tone of his voice that hurt the most. There was a hollow acceptance in the way he spoke, as though he'd never really believed she'd want to be with him. It tore at her heart and she forced herself to hold back the sobs rising from her chest. He wouldn't understand why she cried, and she wouldn't be able to tell him without confessing everything.

“But if you stay...” he whispered heavily, “I'd devote every second of my life to your happiness.”

Lark breathed deeply to maintain her resolve and speak with a conviction he'd believe. "I know you would. As long as possible anyway. But someday, you'd have to marry and then I'd..."

The words thickened in her throat and she couldn't finish, but he'd already responded with a growl of frustration as he rose up on his elbow and rolled her to her back. She couldn't avoid his dark, intense visage as he loomed over her.

"What are you saying?" His tone was hard and blunt.

Lark refused to close her eyes as she said the rest. "I won't put myself through that, Alastair. If I stay with you now, the pain of leaving will be infinitely deeper when it inevitably becomes necessary."

He laid his palm against the side of her face. "Then save us both the pain and promise never to leave me."

Though tears threatened, she boldly, bravely met his stare. "You'd have me watch from the shadows while you choose a bride and father her children?" His body tensed sharply and his eyes flashed with sudden temper. But now that she started unloading her fears, she couldn't stop. "Would you keep me on as housekeeper in your family household? Or set me up in a little house nearby where you'd only come to visit when your family is away?"

The harsh growl that issued from his throat finally urged her into silence. With a look of fury hardening his features, he shoved to his feet and walked away.

Lark drew deep breaths, feeling more vulnerable and uncertain than she ever had in her life. Sitting up, she realized she still wore her corset and chemise, and she bent her knees to pull them close to her chest as she wrapped her arms protectively around her legs. From the corner of her eye, she could see him picking up his clothes.

He was furious and he was leaving.

Though she knew it had to happen, it still broke her heart. She just needed to hold it together for a little longer. Once he was gone, she'd allow the wrenching sadness to claim her. But not yet. Breathing deeply through her nose, she kept her gaze focused pointedly on the carpet in front of her as she listened for the door to open then close behind him.

When he suddenly crouched in front of her, her heart jolted in surprise. He'd put his breeches on but nothing else, and in his hand was a folded piece of paper. As he unfolded it, he captured her gaze. "I obtained this three days ago. Though I refused to do anything until my father's legacy was fully put to rest, I had no intention of waiting a second longer than necessary." He handed her the document, and it took her only a moment to see it was a special license for marriage. "If you want a proper engagement, I can force myself to be patient. But I

love you more than I ever imagined possible, and I'd rather not wait another day to take you as my wife."

She didn't realize she'd started shaking her head until he reached for her, pulling her onto his lap as he sat back on his heels. Her legs parted naturally around his hips, and his hands gripped forcefully to her buttocks, hauling her in as close as he could get her.

"Don't say no," he pleaded roughly.

She looked into his eyes and could barely form the words she had to say. "I can't marry you. You're a marquess and I'm—"

"Everything," he insisted as he doubled his arms around her.

"I'm a servant," she argued despite the insistent spark of hope that was steadily expanding within her. "It isn't done."

"It will be." One of his hands smoothed up her spine to cradle the back of her head. "Just tell me you love me," he demanded gruffly.

She realized then that he didn't know. He didn't know how madly, completely, and hopelessly in love with him she was.

Dropping the license, she framed his face in her hands and stared intently into his eyes. "I love you with every bit of my being. Every breath. Every beat of my heart. And with every hope and fear I possess. I love you, Alastair."

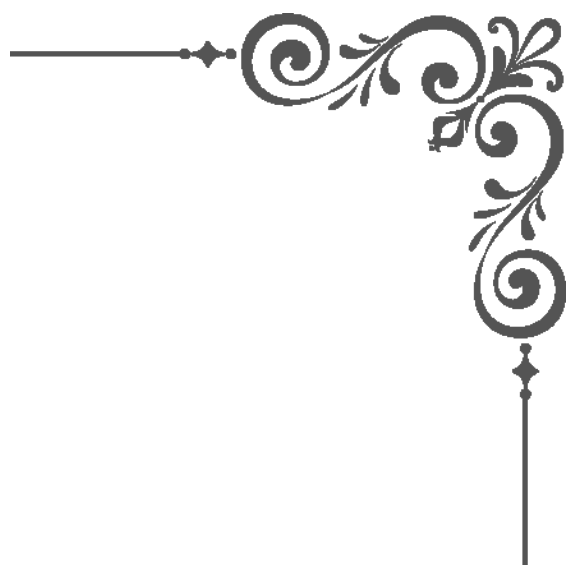
He tightened his grip around her body. "Marry me—today—and I'll devote the rest of my life to becoming worthy of your love."

"You have nothing to prove. You're worth so much more than you know."

His fingers fisted in her hair. "Is that a yes?"

Though shock still made her feel as though the moment couldn't possibly be real, she managed a quick nod before he brought her mouth to his for a stirring kiss that impassioned her blood and quickly had her aching for more. When he slid his lips to the sensitive skin of her neck, she rocked needfully against his hardness as she gasped a request. "Would you consider putting off the wedding for just a couple hours?"

His answer was a rough growl that tingled through her blood as he lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed.



Epilogue

The first time Alastair heard the nearly imperceptible sound coming from the concealed door behind him, he ignored it. The second time, he smiled but did not move from his position leaning over his desk in the study. In fact, he peered even more intently at his steward's report.

The odd silence that followed told him the intruder was Juliet. And the quiet stumble and muffled giggle that came soon after revealed her little sister, Hannah, was tagging along.

Just as they came within reach of his chair, Alastair spun around with a low roar that caused both girls to shriek and jump. Though Hannah dissolved into a fit of giggles, Juliet glared severely at her sister.

"I'd have made it if she hadn't cried until I said she could come, too."

"Probably true," Alastair allowed with a smile, "but you were far noisier than her at the same age."

"That's impossible," Juliet argued with the kind of arrogance reserved for seven-year-olds.

Gratefully, four-year-old Hannah was utterly unfazed by her sister's criticism as she hopped up onto Alastair's knee. "Cook made biscuits! They're all warm and soft from the oven. Mama said we should see if you want some before we eat 'em all."

Alastair chuckled then smiled villainously. "Maybe I'll beat you to the kitchens and eat them all myself."

Both girls widened their eyes in horror before they both took off running.

Allowing them a bit of a head start, he stood and glanced up at the portrait hanging above the fireplace mantel. And just as it did every time he looked at it, the painting of Lark standing in an ice-blue gown with her golden hair free around her shoulders against the backdrop of a midnight garden inspired a fierce rush of emotion. It was love, gratitude, awe, and a humble disbelief that he'd somehow ended up with the kind of life and family he'd never even allowed himself to dream about.

He knew she was there before she slipped her arms around him and pressed herself against his back. Not because she made any sound—she never did—but because he felt her. Deeper and more

intrinsically every day.

She was the moonlight in his dark sky.

Taking her hand from where she pressed it to his chest, he lifted it to plant a kiss to her palm. Then he tugged her around to stand before him so he could encircle her in his arms.

Smiling up at him, she warned, "You'd better hurry to the kitchen if you want a biscuit."

"Mrs. Reynard always sets a couple aside for me."

"Of course she does," Lark replied with a laugh as she slipped her arms around his neck and pressed warmly against him. "I suppose that shouldn't surprise me. Don't forget Mason and Katherine are coming for dinner tonight with the children. And since Frederick happens to be in town, he'll be joining us as well."

Alastair nodded. Dinner with his cousins had been a near monthly occurrence for years and had become something he looked forward to. Every now and then the Turners joined them as well. "As long as it doesn't go too late. I've something special planned for us once the girls are abed."

"You do?" she asked with a curious sideways glance.

Giving her an accusing scowl, he said, "Don't tell me you've forgotten what tonight is."

Their anniversary. Though they'd never gotten into the habit of celebrating in any sort of grand fashion, they never failed to acknowledge the night of their hasty ceremony between the two of them. Usually in the intimacy of their bedroom.

She gave him a sharp little frown. "I never forget." Then her lips curved in a secretive little smile of her own. "I've got something planned as well."

And though he was tempted to sweep her up the stairs to their bedroom right then and there to claim her gift, he resisted, choosing to savor the anticipation instead.

There was no need to rush when they had the rest of their lives.

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About the Author

Amy grew up in a small dairy town in northern Wisconsin and after earning a Liberal Arts degree from the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities, she eventually made her way back to Wisconsin (though to a slightly larger town) and lives there with her husband and three children. She spends her early mornings writing before heading off to her day job. The rest of her time is spent trying to keep up with the kids and squeeze in some stolen moments with her husband.

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